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# ‘On Not Eating Rice Whilst Grieving’: An Exploratory Study on the Relationship Between Me ro’ Death Ritual and Self-Management

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## ABSTRACT

Me ro’ tradition mandates families of a recently deceased person to abstain from consuming rice and entering rice fields until the deceased is buried. However, executing this tradition is considered challenging due to rice’s position as staple food with religious significance. Furthermore, the difficulty of adhering to Me ro’ lies in the virtue of self-management of the family members. This exploratory study uses an observational method and in-depth interviews to collect information. Triangulation, involving documentation, recording, and peer-reviewed sources, is employed to ensure the validity, impartiality, and ethicality of the information. Two elders from Simbuang Village and two students who are originally from the village, but have studied outside of Simbuang Village serves as the informants of this study. The result of this study reveals Me ro’ tradition to require stringent procedures, social sanctions, and economic obligations, which renders it to be challenging to fulfil. Moreover, to successfully accomplish Me ro’, it depends on psychological, social, existential determinants, and lifestyle factors. Therefore, practicing Me ro’ is not solely contingent on individual self-discipline, but also relies on the community’s involvement to encourage, motivate, and supervise the Me ro’ practice. In conclusion, it relies upon individual’s self-management and the community’s ability to collectively support and supervise in the procedures.

**Keywords:** *Me ro’; deceased; Simbuang village; self-management; rice*

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## INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is known for its diverse culture which have been transmitted across generations and transferred through learning (Embon, 2018). One of the famous traditional ceremonies in Indonesia is ‘Rambu Solo’, a traditional ceremony in Tana Toraja, South Sulawesi. In Torajan society, Rambu Solo’ is a traditional funeral ceremony which emanates from the teaching of a local Torajan religion, Aluk Todolo. The Torajan people consider that a person who dies and has not been buried is sick and should be treated like living people, needing assistance to eat and drink and being talked to on occasions. In the community, the burial of a corpse is not conducted

immediately; rather, it requires a prior sacrifice of buffaloes or pigs, which can be significantly costly to arrange (Alfarah et al., 2021). Thus, the burial of the corpse can be delayed to either a month, three months, or, in some cases, years after the death (Tsintjilonis, 2007).

As a part of Rambu Solo’ ceremony, the Torajan observe an age-old tradition known as Me ro’. It has been practiced for generations, serving as a longstanding custom within Tana Toraja. While it was once diligently carried out by the Tana Torajan community, it is less frequently observed in the present time, as it will be discussed in the following section.

Simbuang Village remains one of the few areas where this tradition persists. *Me ro'* dictates that family members to refrain from consuming rice until the deceased individual is laid to rest. This tradition bears a resemblance to the fasting practices observed by many religions (e.g. Moeslem and Christian). However, the main difference lies in its duration; unlike the common practice of fasting, which follows a predetermined time frame. *Me ro'* lacks a fixed period. Instead, its duration is contingent upon the time required to conduct the burial. In essence, *Me ro'* tradition may extend over days, months, or even years.

The Torajan people hold rice in high regard, considering it both staple food and a spiritually significant entity. It is perceived as a precious plant bestowed upon them by their ancestors, becoming one of the three fundamental pillars of human life (Lamba, 2021; Ranteallo et al., 2021). Implementing *Me ro'* presents several challenges, with the primary hurdle being the need to refrain from consuming rice for an unspecified duration. Additionally, adhering to the tradition entails the prohibition of family members of the deceased from setting foot on the mud of their family's rice fields. Compounding the difficulty, Simbuang Village has been facing shortages of rice substitutes such as corn and tubers which further complicates the implementation of *Me ro'*.

As described above, *Me ro'* tradition appears challenging and complex. Engaging in this tradition demands a family with robust motivation and self-control, as they must abstain from consuming rice for an unspecified duration. The *Me ro'* tradition appears intricate and challenging based on the preceding explanation. While engaging in this tradition demands a commitment to self-management practices, The goal of self-management is to empower individuals in their recoveries from grief, equipping them with the necessary skills and confidence to proactively recognize and navigate their own lives (Lean et al., 2019). In essence, self-management can be described as an individual's capacity to regulate their action in relation to prioritize such as deciding which one worth one's attention, determining what actions one has to take in certain situation, and committing to complete tasks accordingly.

In the context of *Me ro'*, self-management in the ritual appears challenging since Indonesians eat rice frequently, it goes to the extent that some Indonesians consider a meal is incomplete without rice; adherents of *Me ro'* tradition must resist the temptation to consume rice and opt for alternatives like corn and tubers. Successfully implementing *Me ro'* tradition, which prohibits rice

consumption for a specific duration and restricts to work and visit the field until the deceased family member is buried is undoubtedly difficult for them.

Adhering to this tradition is difficult in certain ways. The challenge is evident in two ways: 1) Indonesians often perceived that eating without rice is synonymous with having an inadequate meal, emphasizing a cultural value. 2) For the Torajans, rice is not merely food, it is a divine service to God. Refraining from consuming rice can potentially lessen the sanctity of their worship. In other words, by not eating rice it can make the worship less sacred. Therefore, considering the challenge, the preservation of tradition in a specific area of Tana Toraja, Simbuang Village, piques researchers' curiosity. They are eager to understand the village's self-management practices and how they effectively carry out *Me ro'* tradition. Simbuang appears to stand out as a community which fully dedicate themselves to maintain *Me ro'* tradition, in contrast to the other Torajan villages that only partially adhere to it (refer to the next section).

This paper begins with a brief overview of self-management as a concept, followed by an exploration of *Me ro'* tradition as presently recognized by the Simbuang Villagers. Subsequently, the authors show the challenge with the practice of *Me ro'* tradition and the reasons why numerous areas in Toraja have discontinued or compromise this tradition. In the following section, the authors argue why and how *Me ro'* tradition is related to self-management. Afterwards, the authors posit that the realization of the essential values of *Me ro'* by the family member practicing it is imperative for its successful continuation in the community.

## **Understanding Self-Management Practices Through Explorative Studies**

The concept of self-management can be understood as a psychological term that describes the process of attaining self-autonomy. However, there is a lack of consensus on its precise definition (Barlow et al., 2002). The assessment of self-management revolves around an individual's ability to plan, focus, and evaluate their activities (Knowles, 1975). Self-management can also be viewed as a strategy that uses the principles of behaviour analysis to modify or regulate one's behaviour (Martin & Pear, 2019).

Studies on self-management often explore the relationship between self-control and the prevention of health conditions. These conditions may include diabetes, asthma, hypertension, heart disease, mental health issues, and other chronic ailments (Barlow et al., 2002;Rijken

et al., 2008; Pinnock et al., 2017; Lean et al., 2019). In addition to health research, self-management is frequently employed as a technique by psychologists to address a variety of human psychological challenges. Self-management has been correlated with accomplishments in one's career, enhanced creativity, and improved overall performance (Rustam et al., 2020; Manz & Sims, 1980; Wheeler et al., 2020; Wilhelm & Hirschi, 2019). Existing research elucidates self-management as the cultivation of an individual's psychological mindset to autonomously navigate various objectives. Despite differing goals, the overarching idea is to equip oneself with the capacity for self-direction towards achievement. Consequently, the research underscores the significance of self-management in preventing health decline, fostering career success, and enhancing overall performance. In essence, an individual's self-management profoundly influences their quality of life. This daily practice involves active engagement with both family and society, serving as a mode of self-control amidst the shifts in lifestyle, social dynamics, culture, and spirituality that can inevitably impact an individual's life (Richard & Shea, 2011).

However, the existing literature has not clearly demonstrated the relationship between self-management and the incorporation of it in a cultural tradition context, specifically in *Me ro'*. This assertion has been validated by a comprehensive search of Scopus and Google Scholar literature spanning from 1985 to 2022 using the Publish or Perish (POP) application. The result of this search yields no evidence of a connection between *Me ro'* tradition and self-management. Notably, recent research in the past decade on the tradition has been predominantly focused on discussions related to the Rambu Solo traditional ceremony (e.g. Alfara et al., 2021; Hasbi et al., 2019; Panggarra, 2014; Rima, 2019), and *Aluk Todolo* as religion (refer to the next section) (e.g. Budiman, 2013; Suryamodjo et al., 2022).

To comprehend the phenomenon of self-management practices with *Me ro'* tradition requires a field study that can study the tradition directly and thoroughly. Therefore, An exploratory study is used to investigate the *Me ro'* tradition, particularly in areas where information and knowledge are scarce. This study attempts to directly learn the society and appear as an integral part of the community itself (see Hill & Stamey, 1990). The researcher will observe in firsthand experience how a grieving family copes by abstaining from consuming rice and refraining from walking in paddy fields until the deceased family member is laid to rest.

This research is rooted in social learning theory

(Bandura et al., 1961), which explains a continuous reciprocal relationship among cognitive, behavioral, and social-environmental determinants. In other words, individuals acquire the norms and customs prevalent in their society over time. In addition to The culture and traditions of society that have been passed down through generation will shape people's minds about values and symbols that become a tradition believed to be accurate and could act as guidance in society (Bruner, 2009; Barney, 1986; Hofstede, 2011). Another article mentioned that culture or tradition, formed from experience and building values and beliefs, is part of knowledge resources (Serrat, 2017).

## METHODS

Exploratory research, serves as a crucial phase in the social sciences to better understand a particular topic, phenomenon, or problem before embarking on more in-depth and focused investigations (Stebbins, 2001). Exploratory research is often qualitative, seeking to provide deep insight and understanding of a problem. In practical terms, this exploratory research uses an approach of social research that relies on 'being there' (Walsh et al., 2023). This study allows for detailed descriptions of situations and observable behaviors, while also capturing participants' experiences, attitudes, beliefs, thoughts and reflections in their own words (Marcén et al., 2013). In other words, this research is considered appropriate to use exploratory research methods to obtain information related to behaviors and interdisciplinary relations between community groups. This method of research requires fieldwork, a proper concept of the research material, and data collection techniques (Chrysochou, 2017). In order to obtain a detailed cultural description, the authors follow Hill & Stamey (1990) 'subjective soaking'.

In order to replicate the study conducted by Hill & Stamey, the researcher immersed themselves in Simbuang village. They actively socialized and interacted with the community to, temporarily, adopt the life of a villager. This approach is expected to present a complete, clear and credible picture and ensuring the selection of appropriate informants in the application of *Me ro'* tradition inside of the village of Simbuang.

## Prolonged Engagement and Observation

To comprehend the intricacies of *Me ro'* tradition, it is imperative to engage in profound observation. In this context, researcher dedicated approximately four months to immerse themselves in the fieldwork.

During this period, she resided within the community, diligently observing, recording, and conducting informal interviews with the key informants. This approach is not only enhances the depth of information but also fosters community acceptance and trust. This researcher hails from Simbuang village and is currently in her final year of studies, which positions her as an insider researcher. Such researchers are actively engaged with the subject of their research, offering a distinct and valuable perspective. Being insiders, they benefit from profound knowledge, efficient access, and the ability to build trusting relationships more effectively, given their embedded presence in the community and pre-existing connections (Marcén et al., 2013; Walsh et al., 2023). However, insider researchers encounter challenges associated with bias, such as social desirability bias, and ethical issues. To address these concerns, two key strategies were employed in this study. Firstly, researchers not directly involved in the fieldwork which facilitated regular discussions and debriefing sessions, offering an external perspective. This approach aimed to identify and tackle potential biases and ethical concerns. Secondly, the study adhered rigorously to the triangulation procedure (Bell, 2019).

Even though social desirability bias in qualitative research may seem challenging to overcome, it is not insurmountable. One effective approach to minimize this bias is by enhancing the comfort level during in-depth interview sessions for both the participant and the researcher (Bergen & Labonté, 2019). In our study, the authors replicated the methods used by Hill & Stamey (1990) to obtain data on homeless in America. Similar to Hill & Stamey, the authors adopted a participatory approach, which required them to immerse themselves in the experiences of homeless individuals. With the aforementioned strategy, our insider researcher, a native of Simbuang village, played a crucial role in swiftly gaining the trust of the community. The insights gathered from informal interviews are sufficient to be deemed reliable, provide accurate descriptions of Me ro' tradition and effectively meet the primary objectives of our research.

In the initial phase of collecting data, observations and interviews were discreetly carried out from the residents of Simbuang village. At this stage of our research, only one of the researchers was made known to the community as a resident of Simbuang. However, once the data and information were gathered, complete transparency was maintained. The community of Simbuang village was notified that the collected data and information would be utilized as a research material. In response to that, they expressed no objections to this

utilization (see, Bell, 2019). This is one of the ways to prevent unethical concerns before publishing the research findings. However, the informants refused to be named; they remain anonymous. It is worth noting that while carrying out this research, the informants communicated in two languages, Indonesian and Simbuang-Toraja.

In principle, this study maintains openness by involving a diverse range of informants. The researchers sought to gather comprehensive information, and upon conducting observations and interviews across various communities, it became evident that the most thorough and reliable insights into the Me ro' tradition in Simbuang village could be obtained from two elders while at the same time the village head of Simbuang (*Kepala Lembang*) suggested to approach these two elders. Consequently, with the support of the researcher's well connection to several people, including the insider researchers who often collaborated with or assisted the two elders, an effort was made to establish trust and proximity. By Employing an explorative study approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with these two elders, who become the foundational source of information for this research. Additional information was gathered through interviews with two students from Simbuang village who possessed knowledge of Me ro', despite never having directly participated in it (refer to the next section). These interviews aim to offer supplementary insights to the execution of Me ro' tradition when the performers are situated beyond Simbuang village. The information-gathering process involved conducting informal interviews in a relaxed setting, facilitating the extraction of honest and heartfelt perspectives from the informants.

### **Triangulation**

Primary data collection encompassed audio-taped interviews, photo documentation, and video recordings conducted between January and May 2022. In practical terms, the process involved various observations and informal interviews within different communities, ultimately leading to the identification of two key informants capable of providing valuable insights. The interviews were specifically carried out with the two notable elders, recognized as traditional village figures. In addition to interviews, data and information were gathered through careful observation. Fortunately, during the insider researcher's visit to Simbuang Village for observations and interviews, an unexpected alignment occurred as the funeral ceremony for one of the village's grandmothers ('nenek') who had passed away over a year ago was taking place. This serendipitous moment

provided an opportunity to observe and engage with the community.

Several noteworthy observations were made, including the preservation of the deceased grandmother's body, which the community perceived as either not deceased or merely ailing (Pakande Tomate). In the field, the researcher successfully documented the ceremony of transporting the corpse to its final resting place (ma' patekka), along with various associated activities until the bereaved family donned specific attire and accessories (for detailed information, refer to the next section). During this period, the researcher closely observed the Me ro' tradition, a practice upheld by grieving family members for over a year.

To mitigate bias and address ethical concerns, interviews with students from Simbuang Village at one of the Universities in North Sulawesi were conducted by an external researcher, not affiliated as an insider researcher. Following the completion of field research in Simbuang village, two female students, aged 18 to 20, were chosen as informants based on recommendations from the Toraja Student Association in Minahasa, North Sulawesi (PERMATA). However, The researchers found it difficult to obtain informants from Simbuang village who were outside the village and who had practised Me ro' directly. Alternatively, in order to obtain the necessary information, two informants who had indirect experience of practicing the Me ro' tradition were selected. In other words, they have not directly participated in the Me ro' tradition, but they have family or relatives who have observed the Me ro' tradition. This approach is adopted to gain insights into the ongoing implementation of Me ro', particularly in the case when family members are away or no longer reside in Simbuang Village for an extended period.

### **Team Interaction, Debriefing by Peers and Member Checks**

The Researchers of this study met regularly and discussed each personal interpretation before making a collective agreement. However, this process certainly led to differences and debates, adding complexity to the research endeavors and complicating the path to a collective conclusion. However, despite the challenge, the collective agreement could be made by incorporating several insights. To enhance the accountability of the researchers' collective conclusions, external peer reviews were deemed essential. These reviews, conducted by individuals not affiliated with the authors, proved instrumental in mitigating the subjectivity which might arise in the research process. Consequently, the report

gained greater objectivity through the collaborative scrutiny of both internal researchers and external peers. In this specific instance, the external peer reviewer hailed from an academic institution renowned for its expertise in cultural materials, particularly the Toraja culture. It is noteworthy that this reviewer represented a university in North Sulawesi, not attached to the institution of the primary researchers.

### **Measurement**

As explained in the previous section, this study uses observational method and in-depth interviews. The investigation delves into the contemporary collective understanding of Me ro' in Simbuang Village. This encompasses subjects, procedures, symbols, economic issues, and social sanctions. The aim is to gather comprehensive information, measure, and establish limitations for the study. Simultaneously, the study explores psychological, social, existential determinants, and lifestyle factors to understand the correlation between self-management and Me Ro (Disler et al., 2012; Schulman-Green et al., 2016).

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **The Current Knowledge of Me ro'**

The discussion of the people's current knowledge of Simbuang Village must be intertwined with the origin of Me ro' tradition for effective comparison. Me ro' tradition is a part of Torajan culture pertaining to death. In general, Me ro' is observed by immediate family members, as mentioned earlier. When a beloved family member, for instance a grandmother, passes away, it becomes the responsibility of other close relatives to conduct the tradition. However, it's worth noting that while the tradition may also be embraced by other influential families and community members who share a strong connection with the deceased, it is not obligatory for them to do so.

When family members who passes away (as discussed in the next section) and they have not undergone the customary burial rituals involving some specific celebration, feasting, and the sacrificial cutting of livestock, the deceased individual's body remains within the household and is perceived as still being alive. In this state, the deceased is regarded as being unwell, treated as if they were a sick person, and even being addressed to (with conversations) by other family members (Budiman, 2013; Ismail, 2019). This particular circumstance is referred to as Pakande Tomate's.

Furthermore, all family members must experience



Figure 1. Documentation of *Pakande Tomate's* activities

the depth of grief. Families have various ways of expressing their sorrow, and one of the traditions to do so is Me ro' ceremony. This cultural practice is intricately intertwined with the Aluk Todolo belief, the indigenous religion of the Torajan Tribe. Recognized officially in 1969 as an elaboration of the Hindu Religion and named Alukta, meaning "our religion," Aluk Todolo has been a significant cultural importance for the tribe. However, Aluk Todolo's has started to wane with the advent of Christianity in Tana Toraja. despite Christianity now being the predominant religion among the Torajan people, including Simbuang Village, it does not swiftly eradicate the cultural or traditional aspects of the Aluk Todolo belief (Salurante, 2020; Wikandatu et al., 2022). For instance, Rambu Solo tradition as part of the Aluk Todolo belief remains to exist in the village. Rambu Solo is a funeral ceremony and to worship the spirits of the dead body, which is believed to be part of the ancestors' spirit (Patiung et al., 2020). It is also intended for the last respects and send-offs to puya (heaven). This ceremony is also meaningful because the Torajan people regard it as a ceremony to honor the deceased and wishfully ensure a smooth journey to the afterlife (Palimbong, 2016).

The ceremony of Rambu Solo in Tana Toraja is well-known for its integral livestock sacrifice, typically involving buffaloes or pigs. This tradition is seen as a symbolic representation of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the Cross, evoking both sorrow and joy among its followers (Salurante, 2020). Consequently, these traditions continue to thrive in Tana Toraja.

As part of the Rambu Solo ceremony, the Torajan people usually conducted the customary tradition, Me ro'. According to the traditional sources, Me ro' tradition is performed to display the family's deep feelings of grief. Besides close family members, Me ro' can also be observed by a person who is not related by blood but feels the lost or grief. In practice, the villagers

should give notice that they will practice Me ro' to all villagers; therefore, all residents of Simbuang Village can be aware of the implementation of the Me ro' tradition, and residents are expected to become Supervisors of the process.

Mr. Elder One (pseudonym) as one of the community leaders in Simbuang Village said:

*Yake Me ro' Tau" ; "denganni tomaktomate, iya dingei Me Ro' aka denganni anggota Keluarga, siulukta raka atau sangtondokta" (Simbuang-Torajan Languange)*

(If someone engages in the Me ro' ritual, it signifies the passing of an individual. The participants in this ritual typically belong to the nuclear family, including cousins and other close relatives).

The interview highlights Me ro' as an expression of condolences towards the grieving family members. Consequently, individuals feel a temporary obligation to refrain from consuming rice. The informant characterizes Me ro' as the ultimate tribute to the departed. The understanding of the Me ro' tradition among both, the elderly and the youth, has recently evolved, as revealed through observations and informal interviews. However, the original cultural knowledge associated with Me ro' remains intact within the Simbuang Village community.

The age-old tradition of Me ro' appears to be confined to Simbuang village, as many other areas in Tana Toraja have discontinued the full or partially compromise practice of Me ro'. The findings in the Simbuang Village community reveal three reasons why the comprehensive practice of Me ro' faces challenges. Firstly, Me ro' is no longer widely observed in other regions due to the restrictions on rice consumption and limitations on entering fields within a specific time frame. Secondly, the community deems it acceptable to refrain from burying the deceased for an extended period, but, due to restrictions to enter plantation fields makes the scarcity of rice and its substitutes poses a significant problem. Lastly, there is a prevailing sentiment among Indonesians pertaining to rice's necessity in meals.

In the next section, the authors explain why Me ro' tradition is not a simple tradition to accomplish due to the various physical and social challenges and possible costs involved. Moreover, this section provides the rationale for why the implementation of the Me ro' tradition needs to be connected to practices of self-management.

## The Subject, Procedure and Symbols

Me ro' is a tradition wherein the participants is typically

consist of close family members, such as nuclear family members, cousins, or other relatives in close proximity (as mentioned in the quotation above). Additionally, neighbors or anyone experiencing grief due to the loss of the deceased may choose to partake in the Me ro' tradition, although it is not mandatory. However, there seems to be varied interpretations regarding who should engage in this tradition. Mr. Elder One elaborated on this in Bahasa:

*"Hanya keluarga inti, tapi tidak dipaksakan bagi anggota yang sakit, anak kecil dan ibu hamil karena dapat mengganggu kesehatan."*

((It is) only for the immediate family, but it's not forced on ill people, kids, and pregnant women, as it is risky for their health)

While there are varieties – of interpretations, they aren't fundamentally significant. Me ro' tradition becomes imperative when someone passes away, serving as an expression of sorrow and respect for the departed. Nevertheless, there is a consensus that pregnant women, individuals facing serious illnesses, and kids may be exempted from participating in the Me ro' tradition.

In the Torajan tribe, the deceased person will usually be kept in Rante for a certain period, which may extend to several years. Rante refers to a specialized traditional house structure designed to house the deceased in a wooden coffin prior to the funeral ceremony. Some traditional Torajan houses are equipped with a leren, which specifically intended for the placement of the deceased body. Storing the corpse for a long time is called Dipandan, and storing the corpse within three days is called Pa'tallu. The emphasis in this ceremony is on the uncertainty of time, flexible to the burial time. Thus, the mourning period in Tana Toraja is subject to an uncertain time. Indonesia has different death cultures, but they usually involve a limited time for mourning. For instance, In the Minahasan culture, a person is buried 1 to 3 days after the death, and the family usually does not perform specialized events until the 7th day (called kumawus), and the family usually dresses in black until 1 year after death (Burdam et al., 2020). In Java, whereas the majority of the population is Muslim, the deceased is buried within a maximum of 24 hours and before 'Maghrib' time or before the sun sets. (Permanadeli & Sundararajan, 2021).

Me ro' is a ritual performed on the first day after a person's passing, consisting of two distinct stages. Initially, the individual conducting the Me ro' journey to a designated location to gather a small quantity of

sacred mud known as Lombu. This mud holds a special significance, as only the appointed person is allowed to keep it until the ritual is completed. In the second stage, the collected mud is then applied onto a piece of black cloth, which serves as a head binder for men or a head covering for women. Additionally, the mud may be used to embellish accessories such as for the Rante necklace. The choice of wearing the Rante as a necklace is contingent upon the individual performing Me ro'. The term "Barata" referred to the black cloth, head covering, and necklace adorned with the sacred mud. It serves as a visible symbol or sign indicating that someone is engaged in the Me ro' ritual, distinct from the act of offering rice (to whom). In general, wearing black clothing to symbolize grief is a common practice during times of bereavement in Indonesian culture. However, Barata stands apart with its incorporation of specific accessories and the sacred mud and there is no specified time limit for wearing these mourning clothes.

In addition to the two signs which announce the commencement of Me ro', there are specific procedures to follow if one is unable to finish this tradition. Me ro' is a commitment that cannot be terminated abruptly. Firstly, if an individual relocates to another province for work or further studies, they are still obligated to perform Me ro'. Departure from the village to city for employment or educational pursuits does not justify a permanent or temporary pause in the Me ro' tradition. Instead, it underscores the necessity to uphold the tradition, with the sole exception of performing Barata. The elimination of Barata may be viewed as a loss of direct oversight by the villagers, as they cannot observe whether individuals are actively participating in Me ro'. This absence of Barata signifies a lack of supervision due to the distance from Simbuang village. In such instances, Me ro' becomes a personal obligation and responsibility. According to Mr. Elder One, people are being reminded to continue the tradition wherever they are. They are advised to inform their peer relatives, if there are some, in the same location of their work or study, while leaving the rest to divine guidance. Secondly, the only legitimate reason to temporarily halt Me ro' before the body is buried is for medical reasons. Even in such cases, the cessation is only temporary. Resolving the Me ro' obligation temporarily involves the sacrifice of livestock, such as pigs. The quantity of animals sacrificed is not strictly defined; the crucial aspect is that the meat should be shared with family and community members. Following this temporary pause, the Me ro' obligation must be recommenced once the individual is in good health. Nevertheless, this process is not without its challenges



Figure 2. *To ma' patekk* where a family make the last tribute

and financial costs. Consequently, many individuals performing *Me ro'* choose to persist with the tradition while striving to maintain their health. The sacrifice of livestock is reserved for situations where the person observing *Me ro'* is severely ill.

To permanently conclude *Me ro'*, the deceased body must be buried. The following morning, all individuals practicing *Me ro'* gather at a specific location, typically a spring, to cleanse themselves. Subsequently, they proceed to the deceased's house to assemble and await mealtime. In the afternoon, they may commence their rice consumption.

The figure 2 illustrates the *Ma' patekka* event. This event is a family gathering to deliver the dead body to his or her grave. Usually, only people observing *Me ro'* can sit near the body. As shown in Figure 2, only individuals who have successfully completed *Me ro'* are allowed to sit close to the body to be interred.

## Economic Issue

As discussed, *Me ro'* is inseparable from the funeral ceremony (Rambu Solo). Generally, funerals involve various expenses, ranging from funeral costs to the provisions for mourners. However, in Tana Toraja, funeral ceremonies are notably high cost. The primary cost-surging contributor is the ritual slaughter of buffalo and/or pigs, along with the necessity of inviting the entire village community. Buffaloes and pigs hold significant value in Toraja as prized livestock, and their sacrifice is perceived to be helpful to alleviate the family's grief. Given the substantial expenses involved, these funerals typically occur annually (Sampe, 2020). Consequently, the observation of *Me ro'* also requires a considerable amount of time.

To cover this high cost, Torajan bereaved families often resort to sell their assets and go into debt.

Consequently, a significant number of Torajans find themselves in debt, with their income falling short to cover their debt instalments (Tangdialla et al., 2021). According to the stories shared by the villagers, the deceased individuals, sometimes referred to as "nenek" (grandmothers), must be laid to rest, which prompts efforts for the bereaved family to secure funds for funerals. This often involves selling assets or taking on some debt. Despite a predominantly Christian population among the Torajans, who recognize the physical death of the body and the ascent of the spirit to heaven, the weight of tradition remains an overweighing obligation. *Me ro'* tradition, in particular, proves to be a complex set of custom to adhere to. It brings forth various burdens, especially of a moral and social nature. Mr. Elder One elaborated in the Simbuang-Torajan Language:

*Ia disanga beban partisipasi sebelum dikaburumi tu tomate di tunuanpi tedong sola bai taek mala di kaburu punnala bang, iya tu beban moral kurang i persediaan bahan makanan.*

(What is meant by the responsibility of participation is that before burial, there must be a sacrifice of buffaloes or pigs. A dead person cannot just be buried without (his family) providing food (for the community))

His quote highlights the extent of participation, with the moral concern residing in the obligation to offer a buffalo or pig sacrifice, determined by the caste of the deceased's family. Without this sacrifice, the individual associated with *Me ro'* remains unable to partake in rice consumption until such an offering is made. Additionally, Mr. Elder Two emphasized that this burden must be shouldered, acknowledging its considerable cost:

*Ia ada tingkatan (the level of Me ro') yaitu : taekpa dialan aluk, to dipatallu, to dipandan*

(There are levels (of *Me ro'*): *taekpa dialan aluk, to dipatallu, to dipandan*)

The duration and scale of a death ceremony, including the quantity of the required livestock sacrifices, are decided based on their socioeconomic tiers. The ceremony is categorized into three distinct levels. The first, known as *taekpa dialan aluk*, pertains to the passing of a baby or child within the family. In such instances, *Me ro'* is performed over a span of one to two days, necessitating the sacrifice of one buffalo and a minimum of two pigs. The second, *dipatallu* is a ceremony tailored for individuals with a middle-income status. Here, *Me ro'*



Figure 3. *To Makpasun*: Buffalo Sacrificed

is to be conducted for a minimum of 8 days, accompanied by the mandatory sacrifice of two to four buffaloes or the slaughtering of pigs amounting to at least 14 heads. Lastly, *dipandan* represents a death ceremony exclusive to those with high economic standing (*To sugi*). In this scenario, the *Me ro'* obligation extends even further, spanning at least 15 days for the funeral ceremonies. The sacrificial requirements include 7 to 9 buffaloes and a minimum of 34 pigs.

According to the data from the Indonesia Statistics Bureau (BPS), the average price of buffalo in 2021 exceeded Rp. 16,000,000 (sixteen million rupiah) per head (BPS, 2021). According to study, the *To dipatallu* (middle economics) communities incur a minimum cost of Rp. 64,000,000 (sixty-four million rupiah) to fulfil the *Me ro'* and *Rambu Solo* traditions. This amount specifically covers the slaughter of at least four buffaloes over an eight-day period, excluding additional expenses. It's noteworthy that Toraja funeral ceremonies can escalate to hundreds of millions of rupiah. *Rambu Solo* and *Me ro'* are intricately linked to family relations, social strata identity, and settling outstanding debts (Tumirin & Abdurahim, 2015). Nowadays, the traditional practice of sacrificing buffalo has evolved into a showcase for flaunting and expressing social status (Salubongga, 2015)

### Social Sanctions

In society, there is no separation from punishment or sanctions if one is to be caught making mistakes. In other words, regulations whether written or unwritten always emerge from community traditions. *Me ro'* is one such tradition, rooted in customs passed down through generations, this tradition entails specific regulations and procedures, including sanctions. During the observance of *Me ro'*, social sanctions come into play, such as the feeling of shame within the community for non-compliance with

the tradition. Additionally, social ostracization may occur if a family neglects *Me ro'*. In rural communities, the impact of social sanctions on the village's social fabric is often more profound compared to their effect in urban communities. For instance, the community of Lalumpe Village in South Minahasa, Indonesia, will ostracize people who do not want to submit to the ethnic Minahasan tradition of cooperation, '*Mapalus*' (Wuryaningrat et al., 2017). Hence, the feeling of shame becomes a sanction which position one's differently to the other members of the community.

The *Barata* symbol serves as a powerful reinforcement of the unwritten rules beyond social sanctions. It underscores the idea that whenever *Me ro'* is undertaken, the community maintains vigilant over the involved individuals and their families. This heightened scrutiny makes it considerably more challenging for anyone to breach their *Me ro'* commitments. Despite the absence of conventional penalties such as physical punishment, fines, or imprisonment—typical in criminal or civil cases—the direct supervision by Simbuang villagers and the wider Torajan community proves sufficiently burdensome for individuals to stay dedicated. The widespread familiarity with the *Barata* symbol among all Torajans facilitates the seamless implementation of direct supervision. Its recognition by the community becomes a formidable deterrent, making it increasingly arduous for individuals to deviate from their commitments. It is worth noting that, while there is an escape from scrutiny when individuals temporarily leave Tana Toraja for work or further studies, the pervasive awareness of the *Barata* symbol ensures a lasting impact even beyond the community's immediate reach.

Furthermore, In Simbuang Village, there is a strong belief that violations of *Me ro'* will lead to the failure of the rice harvest. Consequently, if any member of the village fails to fulfil their harvesting duties, the crop failure is attributed to the violator of *Me ro'*. Although it can be demanding for the affected family, every family strives to do their utmost, even if it means incurring debt, to fulfil their obligation to *Me ro'*.

### The Form of Self-Management and Practising *Me ro'*

In the preceding sections, the authors outlined the rigorous procedures inherent in *Me ro'* tradition, highlighting its ability to impose economic pressure and social sanctions. Those who undertake its implementation must possess unwavering commitment and self-motivation. This section delves into the integration of the self-management concept with the execution of the tradition.

Self-management, in this context, refers to a data-driven monitoring and decision-making process. It empowers individuals or organizations to identify and sustain productive behaviors, techniques, methods, or processes. Additionally, it facilitates the assessment of whether defined outcomes have been met and the determination of the success or failure of established goals (Goens & Lange, 1975).

Self-management can be cultivated through individual awareness and social interaction, as per the definition provided. The capacity for self-management arises from individual awareness, nurtured within a community that upholds the positive values associated with necessary tasks, such as the implementation of traditions. The community transforms into a social collective, providing mutual supervision to foster engagement and oversee various facets of community life. These interactions and supervisory dynamics are crucial for preserving social cohesion, addressing community needs, and facilitating the harmonious and thriving coexistence of community members. The upcoming section delves into the formation of the relationship between self-management and Me ro' through social interaction activities.

### **Psychological Determinant**

The baseline in the research to examine psychological factors is perception, anxiety, depression, hope and optimism, self-efficacy, and sense of control (Disler et al., 2012). The results of the observational study indicate that the prominent psychological factors observed were anxiety, hope, and optimism, stemming from the practice of the Me ro' tradition.

The actor, who hails from a family dedicated to abstain from eating rice and entering rice fields, appears to evoke a sense of anxiety which compels individuals to adhere to Me ro'. The preceding section elucidated social sanctions, manifested as shame and ostracism, linked to the fear of harvest failure resulting from Me ro' violations. These sanctions serve as motivators for Me ro' actors to stick to their commitments. In essence, the looming anxiety drives them to prevent failure, safeguarding themselves and their families from potential embarrassment and blame in the event of a harvest failure.

Most Me ro' individuals, apart from experiencing anxiety, hold the belief that dedicating themselves to Me ro' ensures a perfect burial, offering reassurance that the spirits of their family members will reach paradise. Furthermore, they anticipate that their ancestors' spirits will find greater peace in the afterlife. In essence, the Me ro' tradition instills hope and optimism, fostering the

belief that their actions contribute to a perfect transition into death and serve as an aid in guiding spirits towards nirvana. This sense of hope and optimism contributes to the heightened self-efficacy of those participating in Me ro'.

### **Social Determinant**

During our several months of stay and interaction with the Simbuang villagers, the authors observed various social determinants such as social isolation, cultural norms, and access to resources. Social isolation is closely linked to anxiety, influencing the self-management abilities of Me ro' actors who strive to avoid feeling isolated within their social environment. Their efforts are driven by a desire to maintain harmonious-living within society.

Additionally, self-management is positively impacted by the community's knowledge of cultural values. As mentioned earlier, the transfer of knowledge about Me ro' from one generation to another has been considered successful in Simbuang Village, creating a continuity of understanding between the past and present. This continuity reinforces the significance of Me ro' tradition, fostering the perception that its practice is essential and should persist within the society, despite economic challenges. In essence, the continuation of Me ro' serves not only to preserve the tradition but also to uphold the broader cultural fabric itself.

The availability of resources, especially alternative food ingredients such as corn and tubers to replace rice, seems to impede the implementation of Me ro'. This study highlights the challenges associated with cultivating rice substitutes. Primarily, the livelihood of Simbuang villagers revolves around rice farming, with corn and tuber cultivation being secondary and undertaken by only a small portion of the population. This limited adoption may be attributed to the unsuitability of Simbuang Village's land for growing corn or tubers. Despite these constraints, there is no apparent negative impact. According to the National Food Agency, there has been an increase in the Food Security Index (IKP), as well as the affordability and utility of various foodstuffs, including corn and tubers, in Tana Toraja in 2022 compared to 2021 (Badan Pangan Nasional, 2022).

During our extended stay and interactions with the Simbuang villagers, the authors observed several social determinants, namely social isolation, social culture, and access to resources. Social isolation is intricately linked to anxiety, impacting the self-management abilities of the Me ro' actors. Their efforts to thrive are driven by a desire to avoid isolation within their social environment, as they strive for ongoing harmony in society.

The encouragement of self-management is further bolstered by the community's awareness of cultural values. As previously mentioned, the transmission of knowledge about Me ro' within the community has proven to be successful across generations, encompassing both past and present eras. This continuous transfer sustains the significance of Me ro' tradition, fostering the understanding that its practice is essential for societal continuity, even in the face of economic challenges. In essence, the continuation of Me ro' serves as a means to preserve the culture itself.

### Existential Determinant

Existential determinants, such as religiosity, play a significant role in shaping self-management. In the Simbuang village community, despite the official dominance of Christianity, there is a practical coexistence of beliefs outside the Christian framework. Notably, traditions like Rambu solo and the Me ro' tradition persist alongside Christian practices, even though they may contradict Christian beliefs. The coexistence of these two belief systems is an unique aspect of the Simbuang community. Christianity holds the official status and is celebrated through regular services, meanwhile the Aluk Todolo belief system continues to influence activities like Rambu solo and Me ro', especially in the event of a death. This dual belief system reflects a complex interplay of spirituality within the community.

As previously explained, rice holds more than just nutritional significance; it carries sacred and religious values. For the Torajan people, the prohibition of Me ro' actors from consuming rice is not merely a dietary restriction but is deeply intertwined with their worship of God. This prohibition can lead to a perceived reduction in the value of their spiritual practices. Living in accordance with tradition, particularly the Me ro' tradition in Simbuang, adds a psychological burden to individuals. The tradition dictates abstaining from rice consumption until the the deceased body is buried, a practice rooted in honoring the spirits of the ancestors. Despite the psychological challenges, these beliefs act as a self-reinforcement mechanism, encouraging Me ro' participants to remain committed to their traditions until the end.

### Lifestyle

Me ro' has transcended from mere belief to become a way of life for the people of Simbuang, both within and beyond its borders. This signifies that the Me ro' tradition has evolved into a cultural practice deeply ingrained in

the community's lifestyle. While abstaining from rice consumption may initially pose challenges, consistent practice transforms it from a demanding task into a routine.

Interviews with Simbuang people currently studying at a University confirmed their siblings have never secretly violated the Me ro' rules. Miss. Kat Doe (pseudonym) shared the experiences of her relatives who adhered to the Me Ro':

*Setau saya Kakak-kakak saya melakukan Me ro' tidak ada yang menyerah ditengah jalan atau ketahuan melanggar Me ro.*

(as far I know, none of my brothers or sister have ever given up midway, nor were they caught violating Me ro)

Miss Novi Doe (pseudonym) mention the same thing:

*Saudaraku pernah melakukan Me ro' dan berhasil, termasuk saudaraku lainnya tidak pernah diam-diam makan nasi saat keluar kota'.*

(My brothers said he succeeded (in) doing Me ro', they never cheated nor secretly eating rice even though he was out of town).

From the interview above, both informants come from families with a longstanding history of Me ro' practitioners. They openly shared their family's intricate experiences with Me ro', navigating through challenges, yet successfully preserving the tradition. Despite being physically distant from their hometown, the self-management of Simbuang villagers, both within and beyond the village boundaries, remains remarkably robust. They steadfastly uphold the tradition, displaying no inclination to deviate from it.

Informant Kat Doe emphasized that Me ro' is deeply ingrained in the hearts and minds of the Simbuang people, regardless of their current location. When questioned about whether they continue to practice Me ro',: (in Indonesian).

*Waktu saya sedang kuliah di Tondano (Provinsi Sulawesi Utara), saya pernah pulang kampung ke Simbuang dan salah satu nenek (bukan keluarga dekat) kami meninggal, sayapun ikut serta tidak makan nasi, sampai saya kembali ke Tondano baru makan nasi lagi. Bahkan saya pernah dikirimkan hasil panen beras yang tidak dikonsumsi oleh keluarga saya disana karena mereka sedang Me ro'.*

(While I was studying in Tondano (part of North Sulawesi Region), I visited my hometown, Simbuang. During that visit, a distant relative passed away, so I did not eat rice. I continued eating rice after my return to Tondano. Additionally, my family in Simbuang sent me rice crops that hadn't been eaten, as they were stored because of Me ro')

Based on the insights gathered from the interviews above, it can be inferred that Me ro' has undeniably become an integral aspect of the lives of Simbuang villagers. Consequently, even when they are not physically present in the village, adhering to Me ro' commitments remains imperative. Essentially, Me ro' has evolved into a lifestyle for the Simbuang community, closely intertwined with the preservation of their cultural identity. During the discussions, Mr. Elder Two convincingly conveyed that Simbuang Village stands out as the sole community capable of fully embracing and carrying out the tradition. He further highlighted that while other villages may still practice Me Ro', they are yet to adopt a comprehensive and authentic procedural approach. These findings shed light on the fact that numerous contemporary cultures have strayed from their original values. (Wuryaningrat et al., 2017).

## CONCLUSION

The research concludes that the Me ro' tradition, observed by the community in Simbuang village, imposes unique practices, such as refraining from eating rice and abstaining from working in rice fields until the deceased's bodies are laid to rest. This tradition, almost akin to fasting, presents challenges in terms of social and economic implications. As Bruner (1965) notes, culture shapes human identity, making Me ro' a complex yet integral aspect of the community's identity.

Implementing Me ro' is not common in Tana Toraja, potentially due to its intricacies. However, Simbuang village stands out as an exception for successfully maintaining the tradition. The high self-management ability of Simbuang villagers is believed to be a key factor in preserving Me ro' in line with its traditional values. Factors like psychological, social, existential, and lifestyle aspects contribute to the self-management ability, emphasizing the significance of motivation and self-control in successfully carrying out Me ro'.

The mind's strength plays a crucial role in sustaining traditions, as evidenced by the Me ro' practice. Similar to fasting in religious societies, Me ro' requires strong motivation and self-control, emphasizing the role

of the human mind in shaping experiences (Sanders & Sanders, 2011). The Simbuang villagers' connection to Me ro' and their supportive community makes the tradition more manageable despite its challenges. The success of Me ro' doesn't solely rely on individual self-management, but also on community participation. The community's encouragement, motivation, and supervision significantly contribute to the effectiveness of Me ro', emphasizing the importance of organized and controlled self-management. Conceptually, the study implies that local traditions like Me ro' can thrive with self-awareness, individual self-management, and community support. The practical implication highlights the need to preserve cultural values through early local cultural education amid cultural erosion.

However, the study has limitations. The insider researcher may introduce bias and ethical issue, despite attempts to mitigate it (see previous section). The four-month fieldwork duration might not provide a comprehensive understanding of Me ro', and the limitation of observing only funeral ceremonies constrains the study. Basically, the death of a person is not a ceremony that everyone expects, so making observations at the time of the death event is impossible to predict. Ultimately, time constraints became an obstacle in the researchers' inability to observe the Me ro' tradition in its entirety, because, as explained earlier, Me ro' tradition does not have a fixed set of time for its implementation. The small number of informants, mainly relying on two elders, and limited information from students outside Simbuang village pose additional limitations. Addressing these limitations could enhance the study's comprehensiveness and validity.

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