THANKSGIVING TABLE, A CULINARY PERFORMANCE

Sonya Indriati Sondakh, M. Yoesoef
Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Indonesia
sisondakh@gmail.com, Yoesoev2331@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

In Minahasa, North Sulawesi, the people in the villages of Minahasa has an annual harvest-related celebration called Pengucapan Syukur or Thanksgiving celebration of the people of Minahasa. According to a research in South Minahasa, this Christian celebration that has been practiced at least since 1940 has gone through changes along the way. This tradition has developed as such in line with the dynamics of the Minahasans. Thanksgiving used to be celebrated only in the villages in some parts of Minahasa, but nowadays this tradition has also been celebrated in the capital city of Minahasa, Manado. This local thanksgiving tradition clearly focuses on the food being served on the thanksgiving table. In this celebration they have to serve abundant food of traditional taste, championing nasi jaha and dodol. Each and every household has special budget that allows them to prepare abundant food for this occasion. This is a qualitative research using ethnographic approach. Schechner’s performance theory is used to understand the meaning of the thanksgiving table.

KEYWORDS: Thanksgiving, tradition, Minahasa, food

INTRODUCTION

To start, let’s ask these two basic questions: “where is Minahasa and who are the people of Minahasa?” On the northernmost tip of the Sulawesi Island there is an ethnic group named Minahasan who has been living centuries on this land. They have their own legends, myths, beliefs that are of great uniqueness. According to Weichart (2004:56), when talk about “Minahasa”; it would refer either to a geographic area, a political entity or the dominant ethnic group residing in this particular region. In her paper titled “Makan dan minum bersama: feasting commensality in Minahasa, Indonesia (2007), through her research in Minahasa, Weichart confirmed that the people of Minahasa always want to include people in to have meal together. When we happen to be in our friend’s house at lunch or dinnertime, it is highly likely we would be requested to stay to have meal. That’s probably why this particular ethnic group is considered friendly and they treat people equally.

The Minahasan people before converting to Christianity believed in gods and their ancestors. This religious trajectory shows how they consistently perform rituals. One of the so many rituals performed by the traditional Minahasan people is what they used to have in the past that is called fosso rumages um banua. This harvest celebration has developed into new tradition, which is now known as Thanksgiving Celebration. Thanksgiving tradition in Minahasa can be traced to the pre-Christian/pre-colonial era when the Minahasans were still practicing their traditional religion and had yet encountered and accepted the Christian’s faith. Before Christianity
the people of Minahasa practiced a plethora of “traditional religious rituals” called *fosso* that means ritual. The traditional Minahasans had so many rituals for so many activities. The present Minahasans believe that one of the many rituals is *fosso rumages um banua*, which was a ritual of worship to God the Almighty (*Opo Empung Wailan Wangko*). Through this feast they express their gratitude for the good harvest they received from the Almighty God. In its development, when Christianity gained strong position in the areas of Minahasa, a similar feast locally called *Pengucapan Syukur* (thanksgiving) was practiced and this particular survived until present. The Christian Thanksgiving in Minahasa put food as the centre of attention. Apart from the worship in church, which is automatically important, preparation of food in practice is apparently way more important. Every household prepares their food to put on the Thanksgiving Table. Since Thanksgiving in Minahasa is synonymous with food, it is interesting to observe how food has developed starting in the villages of Minahasa from 1940 until now throughout Minahasa and eventually celebrated in the City of Manado for the last five years.

RESEARCH PROBLEMS AND OBJECTIVES

Given that food has special place in harvest-related traditions, specifically in Minahasa, North Sulawesi, this particular research hopefully may have contribution in the study of rituals and of traditional food. The focus of this research is to delve into the food offered on thanksgiving table in thanksgiving day that are performed in Minahasa. Through food, lots of meaning can be explained and then understood. Food is also central to the study of ethnic identity. Food that is prepared in thanksgiving is always special for the people who celebrate it. Not just special, but it brings meaning both as individual and as part of the community. Food is both individual and collective memory.

SIGNIFICANCE OF RESEARCH

Under the discussion of food studies, there is already a plethora of researches on food and the community behind it. This research is also about food, but it is related to a harvest tradition called *Pengucapan Syukur* or Thanksgiving. So many ethnic groups have their own harvest-related celebration but this Thanksgiving of Minahasa is special and this topic is still open to researches. So, doing research on a tradition that champions food will lead us to deeper understanding about the people and how they relate to food and how they use food in their religious, social and cultural life. Food is about daily life, but in this particular tradition this everyday life becomes a paramount issue. It tells stories about the past, the present and the future. That’s why this research is important to be done.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

In terms of theoretical issue, the author chooses to use Schechner’s concept on performance. This preference is based on what Geertz (in Schechner, 2013:4) said about the pitfall of cultural analysis. According to Geertz, cultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete and unfortunately the deeper we go in the analysis, it gets les complete. In his books, Schechner (2003, 2013) has
discussed at length about performance studies, performance theory and the future of performance. What Schechner has offered through his books is useful for the study of tradition. Completing his interest in theatre, Schechner also put much of his time to do research to observe traditions around the world. To begin with, we should understand what performances are according to Schechner. “Performances mark identities, bend time, reshape and adorn the body, and tell stories. Performances of art, rituals, or ordinary life are “restored behaviours,” “twice-behaved behaviours,” performed actions that people train for and rehearse.” This explanation of performances goes farther when he stated that making art involves training and rehearsing is clear, but what about the everyday life activities? Although we are not sure about this, Schechner said that everyday life also involves years of training and practice, of learning appropriate culturally specific bits of behaviour, of adjusting and performing one’s life roles in relation to social and personal circumstances.

One of his deep elucidations suitable for this particular research is the notion of “Is” and “As” Performance. In his book Performance Studies An Introduction (2013), Schechner questioned the difference between “is” performance and “as” performance. Concerning his question on performance, this following is his statement:

“Certain events are performances and other event less so. There are limits to what “is” performance. But just about anything can be studied “as” performance. Something “is” a performance when historical and social context, convention, usage, and tradition say it is. Rituals, play and games, and the roles of everyday life are performances because convention, context, usage, and tradition say so. One cannot determine what “is” a performance without referring to specific cultural circumstances. There is nothing inherent in an action in itself that makes it a performance or disqualifies it from being a performance.

On this topic, Gay McAuley (in Schechner, 2013) showed his concern on the development in performance studies. As performance studies get wider and wider, it risks to become “field without limits” given that its development become an ever-expanding range of performance practices. Schechner sees every action is a performance. Although he accepted Schechner’s definition on performance, McAuley had his own thought. He suggested that to qualify as performance, it must include the presence of performers and those witnessing it. Other than that, such conditions necessitate analysis of the place and temporality that enables the performer and the witness be present to each other and there must be a performance contract between them explicitly or implicitly. He also said that “from the vantage of cultural practice, some actions will be deemed performances and others not; and this will vary from culture to culture, historical period to historical period.”

Furthermore, Schechner (2013) confirmed his thoughts on performance by saying this following:

“Performance is an inclusive term. Theatre is only one node on a continuum that reaches from the ritualization of animals (including humans) through performances in everyday life – greetings, displays of emotion, family scenes, professional roles, and so on – through to play, sports, theatre, dance, ceremonies, rites, and performances of great magnitude.”
Schechner (2013) also suggested that performances could appear in eight types of activities or situations, those of daily human activities such as cooking, socializing in daily life, in arts, in sports and other entertainments, in business, in technology, in sex in both religious and secular rituals and also in play. This author of several books on performance also reminded that those eight types of performances could appear separately, but they can also take place in overlapping situations. Schechner confirmed that cooking at home and worship God in church are parts of the eight activities regarded as Performance.

It is also necessary here to talk about the functions of performance. Based on his researches on many different cultures, Schechner come to a conclusion on the functions of performance. He proposed seven functions of performance: 1/ to entertain, 2/ to create beauty, 3/ to mark or change identity, 4/ to make or foster community, 5/ to heal, 6/ to teach or persuade, and 7/ to deal with the sacred and the demonic.

Bell (1997:160), in her discussion on performance, she said that the qualities of performance could be analysed in terms of several overlapping features such as the fact that performances communicate on multiple sensory levels. They usually involve highly visual imagery, dramatic sounds, and sometimes even tactile, olfactory, and gustatory stimulation. By preparing food for the harvest celebration, for example, the people of Minahasa, this kind of performance involve gustatory stimulation. The power of performance is about the effect of the heightened multisensory experience.

Bell further explained that these features of performance also lie in the dynamics of framing. In the lengthy discussions on sacral symbols, distinctions between sacred and profane, the special and the routine, transcendent ideals and concrete realities can all be evoked by how some activities, places, or people are set off from others. Based on framing, performance is understood to be something other than routine reality.

One concept that is important in this specific research is the concept of commensality. The people of Minahasa like to get together and so they can eat together. As Harry G. West (n.d) said in his article titled “We are who we eat with: Food, Distinction, and Commensality” that “To labor alone, and especially, to eat alone, is not only shameful in many cultural contexts, it is often considered monstrous or sub-human.” This statement in some extent describes how commensality is part of the people of Minahasa. Eating together is a must and that is one of the reasons they have so many feasts in their traditional time and it continues until present.

RESEARCH METHODS

This article is a qualitative research using ethnographic approach in order to understand the culinary performance in the context of a harvest tradition rooted in a traditional belief that later transformed as Christian tradition. This research was carried out in February and July 2019 in South Minahasa especially in the villages of Suluun-Tareran and Wuwuk in South Minahasa. As a comparison, this research also includes the Thanksgiving in Southeast Minahasa.
Thanksgiving Tradition Around the World

Besides the America’s Thanksgiving celebrated annually in November that we all know, we can find many harvest-related traditions. American Thanksgiving has its roots in the history of Pilgrims. The Pilgrims were those who had been persecuted in England and in Holland due to their faith. They are the followers of John Calvin’s teachings and they believed that Scripture was the only guide in all matters of faith and that individuals had the right to interpret the meaning of Scripture.

In Indonesia lots of harvest traditions have been practiced for so long. The traditions include the pacu jawi is a traditional bull race in Tanah Datar, West Sumatra, Indonesia. This bull race involves jockeys who stand on a wooden plough loosely tied to a pair of bulls and hold them by their trails. The bulls cover around 60-250 metres of muddy track in a rice field. The people of Tanah Datar have been conducting this tradition for centuries to celebrate the end of the rice harvest. The race is held concurrently with a village festival of culture called alek pacu jawi. Recently it has become a tourist attraction supported by the government and the subject of multiple award-winning photographs. In West Java they have Seren Taon tradition and in Java and Bali the locals have Dewi Sri Festival.

Many harvest-related tradition is also practiced around the world including in Japan, Barbados, Greece and Cyprus. In Japan, the Shintos celebrate harvest in the form of fertility festival on 15 March every year. They believe that by performing the ritual their harvest in the next months will be abundant. Led by a Shinto leader, this celebration is ended with throwing a mochi (rice cake). There is another story of harvest celebration in Barbados. They have a tradition called Crop Over Festival. This festival originated from a time (1780) when Barbados was the world’s largest producer of sugar. At the end of every sugar harvesting, they hold a huge celebration to mark the abundant harvest. In Greece and Cyprus the Orthodox community also practice a kind of harvest tradition called “Blessing of the Sea”. This celebration coincides the Epiphany Day on the sixth of January. This particular celebration is held near the sea and the archbishop lead his community. The archbishop is to throw a cross to the sea and anyone that is able to catch it will receive a good fortune.

Harvest is one of the major characteristics of the agrarian community. Uniquely in each and every region there is always a harvest tradition. This shows how every agrarian community own their ritual to allow them to have a good, abundant harvest. The rituals performed in the harvest tradition depend on the belief of each community. In Minahasa, North Sulawesi Province, they have a very long tradition namely the fosso rumages um banua and the Christian Thanksgiving.

From fosso rumages um banua to Thanksgiving in Minahasa

As mentioned in the introduction, the traditional fosso rumages um banua and the Christian Thanksgiving of the Minahasans can be regarded as two separate traditions or can also be approached as the same tradition that has something to do with the harvest. Despite all the
similarities in the reasons why they perform such ritual, this deeply rooted tradition has passed periods in the history of Minahasa. From pre-Christian to Christian, pre-Colonial to Colonial, and when finally get their independence from the colonials and become part of the Republic of Indonesia, harvest thanksgiving has been continuously practiced by the Minahasans. As an agrarian society, it is necessary for the people of Minahasa to be grateful for their good harvest. When they still practice their traditional religion, this ritual was performed outdoor as explained by Graafland (1991). The traditional ritual was performed by walian (traditional leader who performed religious ritual) (Wenas, 2007:10). There are a number of walian and they work according to their duty. The walian who took care of agriculture called walian tu’ah, for example, has as his/her job to arrange and guide a particular ritual. Fosso rumages is a ritual, which is performed to express gratefulness in a form of food offering to God Almighty (locally called Opo Empung Wailan Wangko)

When the Westerners (Spaniard, Portuguese, Dutch, English) first arrived in this beautiful land, the people of Minahasa were still practicing their traditional belief. Over time they convert to Christianity, but it was a long and difficult process. It took centuries until eventually the Minahasans were ready to become Christian. After centuries of missionary work, the Minahasans became Christian and now they are the majority in North Sulawesi.

At the time the traditional Minahasans were still practicing their own belief, the harvest-related ritual was performed at the outdoor and included villagers under the leadership of a walian. This ritual called fosso rumages offered food to be presented to their God and to be consumed by the participants of the ritual. This harvest-related celebration eventually changed due to the fact that the Minahasans have finally accepted Christianity as their new belief. Since they converted to Christianity, this harvest tradition was performed in a Christian way based on the church’s liturgy (a form according to which Christian worship is performed).

Far ahead, as a Christian tradition, this harvest-related tradition is performed in two separate places: in people’s houses and in church. The Minahasans have to make preparations for the food they will put on their Thanksgiving Table. Consequently, they have to find the ingredients to make dishes for this special day. This thanksgiving tradition is special for the Minahasans because in this celebration every house is open for everybody (families, friends, and even for total strangers). Although the Minahasans and the Americans celebrate thanksgiving to acknowledge God’s blessing, these two celebrations have a number of differences. In Minahasan Thanksgiving anyone can join the celebration because each and every house is open for all to enjoy the abundant food. This is how they show gratitude to the Almighty God. In Minahasa thanksgiving celebration is public whereas for the Americans this harvest celebration is limited to the family and very close friends.

The so-called Performances in Thanksgiving in Minahasa

The performances, using Schechner’s concept, what are part of the Thanksgiving in Minahasa separate the sacred and the profane. The dichotomy of sacred and profane is a concept posited by the French sociologist Émile Durkheim. He considered it to be the central characteristic of religion: "religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden."
Dimensions in Thanksgiving in Minahasa

The activities that are included in Thanksgiving celebration can be conceptualized into three dimensions: sacred and the profane, inclusive and exclusive, and traditional and modern. In this thanksgiving for harvest, the rituals in church are considered sacred and the rituals at people’s house are profane. In terms of inclusive and exclusive, this opposition tells us about how this event can be both inclusive as well as exclusive. The worship at church is considered exclusive because it only includes the followers of Christianity, but the activities at people’s houses are considered inclusive because they invite everybody to enjoy foods and drinks together. On the dimension of traditional and modern, this tradition shows that one tradition can have both at the same time. Some parts of the tradition are still traditional and the other parts can be so modern.

Food in Harvest (-Related) Tradition

No thanksgiving celebration goes without food. That is how important food is for harvest celebration. All the thanksgiving around the world has special food. We all know in America’s Thanksgiving, turkey is key, the centre of attention of the celebration that must be prepared and presented on the family’s thanksgiving table. Thanksgiving in America is an annual tradition that can be traced back centuries ago when the immigrants from Europe set foot in America. Most Americans know the story of the First Thanksgiving. The Pilgrims, who had been persecuted in England and were unhappy in Holland, sailed to the New World and established a colony in Plymouth, Massachusetts. With the assistance of local Native Americans, the Pilgrims hunted turkeys and planted corn. When the Pilgrims’ crops were harvested, they celebrated the First Thanksgiving. Since then the Americans have been commemorating this special day ever since.

First Thanksgiving for the Americans is described above. What about the thanksgiving in Minahasa? According to Regar’s research (2018) in Suluun-Tareran sub district, South Minahasa, the thanksgiving in Minahasa at least started in 1940. The Minahasans who converted to Christianity started to celebrate their harvest by gather together and eat together the food they brought to church. When in American Thanksgiving they have turkey as the compulsory dish, in Minahasa the local people have nasi jaha. Other than nasi jaha, there is also dodol. These two dishes are compulsory. Nasi jaha is usually made with a combination of glutinous rice, regular rice, coconut milk, lemongrass, and lime leaves. Dodol is a sweet toffee-like sugar palm-based confection. Dodol can be found throughout Indonesia with similar ingredients with slightly different taste. The ingredients are coconut milk, rice flour, palm sugar resulting in sticky sweet snack. Apart from those two dishes, on their Thanksgiving Table they also prepare meats of various animals such as pig, forest mouse, wild boar, bat, dog, and also sometimes snake and monkey. These extreme dishes using extreme animal flesh have been a controversial issue at international level.¹ Many kind of extreme animal flesh are prepared in traditional recipe using local spices.

¹ An extreme market selling extreme animal flesh is located in the City of Tomohon. This market is controversial that it incites activists around the world to close this market. Interestingly enough, the locals keep doing what they have been doing for decades. Actually in North Sulawesi, there are three markets that considered extreme. About Extreme
These traditional recipes are all about spiciness.

Discussing the food served in Thanksgiving in Minahasa, it is important to have a definition of traditional food. Stephanie Langford (2016) suggested this following definition:

In essence, traditional food is the whole food and ancient foods that have been eaten for centuries and even millennia. They are the foods that your great-great-great-grandmother and grandfather would have eaten. They are simple, naturally grown or raised, nutrient-dense, thoughtfully prepared. They are not fads (in fact, they tend to go in direct opposition to most conventional nutritional advice these days.

From this definition, we can draw some important features of traditional food. Traditional food is whole food and ancient food. So it is just natural that such foods were eaten by our great-great-grandmother and grandfather. It is simple, natural grown or raised, nutrient-dense and thoughtfully prepared. Traditional food has something of nutritional content that we don’t have these days.

**Food’s Significance in Thanksgiving Celebration in Minahasa**

From the fieldwork, the author observed that the focus of this tradition of thanksgiving practiced by the Minahasans now is on the food. For that reason, every family tries quite hard to prepare food abundantly so that every single person who participates in the celebration can enjoy the foods and drinks as much as they like to and there will be no worries of running out of food.

In Minahasan Thanksgiving, the food is dominantly the traditional dishes that are of special meaning to the people of Minahasa. That is the reason why collecting food ingredients to be prepared at home and the cooking process itself are part of the performance as suggested by Schechner (2013). In his fan diagram, which describes the system operating in the all-embracing concept of performance, Schechner included almost all activities that people do in their everyday life such as cooking can be considered performance. In this perspective going to the market, cooking at home, singing and dancing, and going to church have the same position. All these activities are performances. This supports Schechner’s statement that performance is an inclusive term.

For centuries – from the time they practiced *fosso rumages* to the Christian Thanksgiving – the people of Minahasa has preserved the food they have always prepared for this harvest celebration. In every thanksgiving, *nasi jaha* (sticky rice cooked in young bamboo) and *dodol*. These two dishes have special meaning. In their traditional ritual called *fosso rumages*, the quality rice from the first harvest was offered to *Opo Empung Wailan Wangko* (God the Almighty) and their ancestors. Besides the obligatory dishes, the menu prepared for the celebration of Thanksgiving usually included various kinds of meat, which for many people outside Minahasa, are quite bizarre.

---

Market of Tomohon, an activist shared in his social media a description of a meat trader was slicing a fruit bat and he was surrounded by other wild animals and what was quite shocking on his right side there was a snake (python).
At the market preparing for Thanksgiving day. This picture shows people buying meat to be cooked. In the picture there are some bamboos that are largely used in this occasion.

This picture shows dishes for the locals served on Thanksgiving Table. This is non-halal foods.

This is the halal table specially prepared for the non-moslem guests.

Food in Thanksgiving in Minahasa: Food Tradition in Transformation

Observing the development of the people practicing this particular tradition, it is quite clear that it has changed in many ways despite the fact that it maintains the essentials that such celebration should have. Thanksgiving Table has always changed from time to time corresponding to the people’s advancement in their social and economic life. What people are able to put on their Thanksgiving Table has a lot to do with their economic standard, their economic capability. The better their economy gets, the more abundant the dishes they prepare for the Thanksgiving Table. With better economy people tend to serve better food, better arrangement of the table, and better
in everything.

In the old days, when the economy is still not as complex as nowadays, when they were still farmers, the preparation of food was carried out in a simple way, a traditional way. People would look for food in the forest not far from their houses. Probably, at some point in the past, they might already have market to purchase ingredients to be cooked but it is not as wide-ranging as the market we imagine. People in the villages of Minahasa still use dry coconut skin to set on fire to cook their food, specifically to cook nasi jaha and other dishes in bamboo.

As the economy becomes more and more complex and the advancement of technology is significant, today’s thanksgiving celebration change substantially. Catering service has become part of the celebration.

The Future of Thanksgiving in Minahasa

What we have discussed above reveals that the Thanksgiving based on Christian faith practiced by the Christians of Minahasa is still going consistently strong. There are a number of reasons to be positive about the future of this harvest tradition. Firstly, this tradition allows people to get together annually to celebrate rituals close to their hearts because this connects them to their ancestors. Their sense of identity becomes significantly great when it comes to such celebration. Secondly, history-wise, the people of Minahasa have dealt with their true identity for a quite a long time due to the condition and situation during the colonial time (specifically during the Dutch era) that has caused them something of great significance to the. They were losing their identity. For decades, the people of Minahasa have still been struggling to find their true identity as Minahasan not as Western people.

From the author’s observation in the field, it shows evidently that, through this special tradition, the needs of the people of Minahasa to be secure identity-wise are fulfilled. In terms of the retention and the transmission of this particular harvest tradition, the author found that this tradition promises a long, long way to the future as it involves food, which is the most important thing in people’s life. Food provides people with food as nutrition and with symbols as an identity.

CONCLUSION

Using the concept of performance that Schechner, the harvest tradition in Minahasa called fosso rumages um banua practiced before Christianity and Thanksgiving based on Christian faith are scrutinized along this article. The daily routine activities such as purchasing cooking ingredients and the process of cooking at home as an important part of this tradition are analysed as performances. As an umbrella term, performance, in Schechner’s opinion, is an inclusive term; almost everything can be included in this term. In case of Thanksgiving of Minahasa, as performance, the rituals they perform are moving from the left pole, which is efficacy, to the right pole, which is entertainment.

This harvest tradition has been and hopefully always will be about rituals that connect the people of Minahasa to their ancestors and such activities are also entertainment. The ritual components that build the whole harvest tradition allow the people of Minahasa to be proud of their identity. With this ever-growing tradition, currently the people of Minahasa, who in the past
have lost their identity, can once again grasp their identity through a tradition that started as *fosso* (ritual) performed by the ancestors of the people of Minahasa and has transformed into a Christian harvest tradition. It is important to emphasize that the Minahasans put food as a paramount element in their life. Through food they maintain the connection with others and they foster peaceful life in their region. This is the current Thanksgiving tradition is all about.

**REFERENCES**


West, Harry G. (n.d) “We are who we eat with: Food, Distinction and Commensality.” [https://doi.org/10.4000/00f.2212](https://doi.org/10.4000/00f.2212)
