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IBAN CULTURAL HERITAGE: AN OVERVIEW OF IBAN TRADITIONAL CULTURAL VALUES AND SOCIAL NORMS, AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR CONTEMPORARY SARAWAK

Peter M. Kedit

This paper attempts firstly, to make an overview of Iban cultural heritage focussing on their traditional cultural values and social norms that underline Iban traditional adaptation to their environment. It attempts to provide an understanding of the traditional principles of the way of life of the Iban in an historical context. Secondly, it discusses both the 'negative' and 'positive' implications of Iban core traditional values and norms with in the context of contemporary needs of Sarawak society within Malaysia.

The Iban of Sarawak form the single most populous indigenous group in Malaysia aside from the Malays. They inherited their own belief, cultures, tradition, and above all a complex of customary laws called adat. They still practise these adats, and identity. By virtue of this continued vitality of their culture, as well as, by their numbers, the Iban must be counted among the most important component of today's Malaysian multi-cultural society.

Hill rice cultivation is the Iban's cultural core and life-style. Therefore they need a large tract of land for cultivating rice. This made the Iban wasteful of jungle tract. Iban life style demands an exploitative and aggressive attitude towards land and non-Iban. In their insatiable drive for land, they evolved martial values and a mobile social structure.

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Hill rice cultivation is the Iban's cultural core and life-style. Therefore they need a large tract of land for cultivating rice. This made the Iban wasteful of jungle tract. Iban life style demands an exploitative and aggressive attitude towards land and non-Iban. In their insatiable drive for land, they evolved martial values and a mobile social structure.

The adaptive cultural pattern was the result of their need to utilise the land effectively. Their collective belief system is both a form of rationale for their relationship with their environment, and a conceptual acumen to solve 'technical' problems arising from swidden farming. In other words, Iban spiritual beliefs rationalise existence and provide mystical explanation for padi cultivation in place of scientific knowledge. Other rituals and cults are but psychological supports for the central conceptual knowledge of swidden farming. Rice is therefore the Iban's main preoccupation in life; herein, lies the corpus of their values and norms.

The rationale for adopting this approach is based on the assumptions that Iban cultural heritage is founded upon the community's successful cultural-ecological adaptation to Borneo's environment. Implicit in this is the allusion to the process and structure under-pinning Iban society's cultural-ecological adaptation, and its special emphasis on the community's values and norms, in its ideal form before the advent of external influences.

For the convenience of our discussion we shall adopt a conceptual framework which is presented as a Model in *Figure 1*. This conceptual model is designed to assist us in identifying and explaining the cause and effects of traditional Iban values and norms. It is in the form of a flow-chart with a generalized pattern of interaction between 'cause' (consisting of the three categories of 'input' variables, they are: Kinsmen and Longhouse; Cultural-ecology: Land and Padi; and *Bilek*-family and Individuals), "immediate consequences" (represented in the sectors dealing with 'Egalitarianism', 'Militarism', and 'Individualism') "intermediate consequences" (in the sectors concerning with 'Kinship', 'Moral' and 'Ritual' obligations and other behavioural responses that flow on in the linkages that follow), and 'ultimate effects' (they are 'Ethnic Solidarity' and 'Socio-economic Stability') of an hypothesised Iban traditional system of values and norms.

In our conceptual model the three 'input' variables (as shown in the three boxes on the top level of the 'flowchart') are the three main 'causes' or 'determinants' of the values and norms under study. The category on "Kinship and Longhouse" principally concerned with Iban kinship system and is referred in the section under 'Social Organization'. The second category "Cultural-ecology and Land-Padi" refers to such variables as geographical and demographic characteristics of Sarawak environment which do not concerned us in this discussion, and therefore, will be taken as understood, except where they allude to the cultural-ecological adaptation of the Iban. The last 'input' category is concerned with the institution of *Bilek*-family and of the individual members constituting it. This sector will be fully discussed in the section dealing with "Social Organization".

The model as shown in *Figure 1* displays several linkages between the 'causes', and the 'intermediate outcomes'. These are hypothesized to lead directly from the "Cultural-ecological" to the desired outcome at the bottom of the 'flow-chart', that is, the sector on "Padi Harvest" and "Socio-economic" stability. It is assumed that the ultimate aim of the Iban was (and in most cases still is) to be assured of a reasonably good harvest of padi before there could be any security and satisfaction in their livelihood.

It should be stressed here that the true strength and direction of these linkages can only be verified by empirical testing. What we have here are only hypothesized connections of conceptualized data as extracted from various literature on the Iban. As yet the inter-connecting variables have not been 'tested', and should therefore not be taken as definitive nor deterministic to represent the real relationship in Iban society. The purpose of this exercise is not to test the degree to which each postulated linkage represents a real relationship, but only to provide some ethnographic description. Furthermore we cannot be too sure that the variables presented in the model are exhaustive of the true nature of Iban society.

The 'immediate consequences' of the "Cultural-ecology" category, for the purpose of this model, can be classed into three types of Iban central values and norms, as represented in the three sectors: namely, (i) *Egalitarianism*, (ii) *Militarism*, and (iii) *Individualism*. On these three categories, it is argued here, depend all other Iban values and norms. Two of these are still dormant and are of primary importance to modern Iban — they are, '*Egalitarianism*' and '*Individualism*,' whereas the third, '*Militarism*' is virtually extinct, with only vestiges of it remains.