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INTERACTIVE CULTURAL ELEMENT: TOWARDS UNITY

Leonard Linggi Jugah

INTRODUCTION

To the Iban, Culture is normally perceived as "Main Asal"/"Kerja Asal" such as *ngajat*, *pantun*, *betenum*, etc. Only lately the academically inclined Iban broaden its scope to "daya idup" (way of life). To fully discuss any subject it is important that we have shared meaning (talking about the same thing). Inter-cultural communication is only possible between people who share a system of meaning.

Fons Trompenaars, an international business consultant in his book "Riding The Waves of Culture" stated that culture is like an onion presenting itself in various layers. The outer layer is the product and artifacts that symbolise the deeper and more basic values and assumption about life. Examples of these are language, handicrafts, arts, fashion, architecture, dance, etc.- what the Iban refers as *main asal/kerja asal*.

The middle layer is Norms and Values. Norm - being the right and the wrong and Values - means the good and the bad.

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The core culture represents our struggle in life. Our fight against nature/environment – flood, cold, wind, famine, earth-quake, etc. In short therefore Culture is our life system – about the way we interpret our experience. It provides us with meaningful context about the way we perceive ourselves and the way we perceive others. Of course different cultures have different assumption about how people relate to one another.

Consideration of interactive cultural elements with implications for social, cultural, and national unity might lead us to consider first the material cultures of Sarawak people. These are the visible and tangible objects. As rich as our material cultures are, they are of secondary, or even tertiary significance. They represent what Edward Hall in his book "Beyond Culture" as "extension transference" i.e. "a process by which we give material expression to what we carry in our minds and our hearts". The beat of the *tawak*, the movement of *ngajat*, or the intricate design of *pua*, are vivid expression of values, source of pride, and the feeling of our hearts. It is those less accessible loci that we must strive for the real integrative cultural elements, as we strive for the hearts and minds of our compatriots.

To put it another way, consideration of cultural elements with integrative functions must begin with the producer rather than the products. For, after all, only human beings interact and produce "interactive elements". Our shared humanity alone makes possible a conference such as this, and the topic we are considering.