



The Sarawak Museum Journal

Vol. XL No. 61

December 1989



ISSN: 0375-3050

E-ISSN: 3036-0188

Citation: Mohd Taib Osman. (1989). Iban Cultural Heritage in the Context of Present Day Malaysia. The Sarawak Museum Journal, XL (61): 15-20

IBAN CULTURAL HERITAGE IN THE CONTEXT OF PRESENT DAY MALAYSIA

Mohd. Taib Osman

INTRODUCTION

The subject to be dealt with in this paper is essentially that of how a culture which has developed and well-adapted to its environments in the past has to make adjustments to the present-day demands. Ethnographical and other studies of the Iban ethnic group have shown how well-adjusted Iban culture has been not only to the environment but also to itself as a design for communal living. What I hope to do in this paper is to show that the longhouse as the focus of Iban traditional cultural orientation had given rise to a balanced view between individual pursuit of self-interest and the consciousness or sensitivity for communal needs. Such cultural orientation should be perpetuated to serve present-day Malaysia, at least in symbolic forms. I shall try to show how cultural traditions which had served the Iban well in the past can be transformed or recreated in new symbolic forms to serve present-day needs. However, right at the outset, I must admit that what I propound here are views from the outside, and therefore cannot claim to be infallible.

IBAN CULTURAL HERITAGE IN THE CONTEXT OF PRESENT DAY MALAYSIA

by

Mohd. Taib Osman

INTRODUCTION

The subject to be dealt with in this paper is essentially that of how a culture which has developed and well-adapted to its environments in the past has to make adjustments to the present-day demands. Ethnographical and other studies of the Iban ethnic group have shown how well-adjusted Iban culture has been not only to the environment but also to itself as a design for communal living. What I hope to do in this paper is to show that the longhouse as the focus of Iban traditional cultural orientation had given rise to a balanced view between individual pursuit of self-interest and the consciousness or sensitivity for communal needs. Such cultural orientation should be perpetuated to serve present-day Malaysia, at least in symbolic forms. I shall try to show how cultural traditions which had served the Iban well in the past can be transformed or recreated in new symbolic forms to serve present-day needs. However, right at the outset, I must admit that what I propound here are views from the outside, and therefore cannot claim to be infallible.

THE IBAN CULTURAL HERITAGE

Perhaps very central to Iban life in the past was the longhouse organisation and the *umai*. Sutlive Jr. has called the longhouse the *microcosmos* of Iban life, because longhouse life-activities reflect in a small way the whole life of the Iban, while the *umai* or *ladang* the *macrocosmos* because it is the place which opens to the great world outside.¹ The structure of the Iban longhouse itself reflects the Iban universe: the assertion of the individual-worth where prestige seems to be manifested in various ways: the focus on the nuclear family in the *bilik*; the responsibility towards the well-being of the neighbours who live under one roof; the socialization of the young; the economic activities and social needs which emphasise on cooperative effort rather than individual. The balance between the sense of individualism, which accounts for the all-out efforts to strive for a successful life, and the needs of communal cooperation, which accounts for peace and harmony within the community, seems to be central to Iban cultural norm. However such balance was able to be maintained because of the structure and organisa-