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SOUND ENVIRONMENTAL ACCOUNTS ABOUT BORNEO'S LAND DAYAKS AND THEIR ECHOES IN CONTEMPORARY PERFORMING ARTS OF THE BIDAYUH IN PADAWAN

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INTRODUCTION

In early literature about Borneo's Land Dayaks, sound environmental accounts surprisingly play a remarkable role as an illustration tool for landscapes, dispositions of the observed and the observers in various situations of daily life or at different places. This article aims to set these accounts into relation with cultural self-reflections presented in today's performing arts of the Bidayuh, the second biggest group of the Dayaks living in Sarawak. By comparing early accounts on sound environment with those about music, various degrees of differentiation can be detected. Experiences in the Bidayuh's performance culture in the Village Annah Rais will serve as a case to be examined in detail.

In current reality, environmental changes through logging, dam projects and the availability of electric power as well as information technology alienate the Bidayuh from a sound environmental setting such as described in early literature. Interestingly, the strangeness between the external traveller and the Borneo interior of the past seems to be not so different in terms of its perceptual impact from the strangeness between the modern Bidayuh themselves and their own sound history. Categories such as sound localness, acoustic adaptiveness and environmental isolation are grouped around the main research question, whether knowledge about sound environmental issues is influencing performing arts intellectually or not. Awareness promotion and political activism seems to shape artistic expressions, which draw on music and dance traditions in an abstract and rather undifferentiated way. Hence this process of re-interpreting traditions idealises a past that has never been real except as part of the Bidayuh's contemporary performing arts.

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Nature and Man

The most persistent theory demonstrated in early writings and subsequently in thousands of later descriptions about people living on Borneo is their supposed “naturalness”, their immediate relation (Denison, 1879; Forbes, 1885; Furness, 1888) to and their active participation in preserving their natural environment.

If we search for synonyms of naturalness, we can learn more about the weak points of this theory: artlessness, genuineness, instinctiveness, naivety, nativeness and simpleness. Why do we believe that people – regardless of their living space – might be happy of being artless and simple?

Not only during conducting long term fieldwork in Padawan but also employing philosophical heuristics, art expressions in the past and today appear rather very different in their awareness or elementary incorporation of environmental issues. Living close to dangerous jungles, woods, rivers and a great variety of wild animals does not necessarily makes people becoming dangerous and wild or producing a dangerously and wildly sounding music. On the contrary, all their art expressions point towards a clear distinction between human and nature. The more people are exposed to unpredictable natural phenomena including disasters and other sudden changes, the more they may feel the need of creating tools against those unpredictable developments and against their usual fear about them.

Henri Frankfort's ideas (1977 [1946]) on the development of relationships between human and nature might be a point of departure in exploring human art expressions in a definite place of Sarawak such as Annah Rais, Taba Sait or Semban, where the perception of nature in conjunction with man is a clear “it” and different from “we” and not dependent on an impersonalised will (*ibid.*: 26). Today, humankind in any place of the world has long left the stages of early responsive development that, as suggested by Frankfort, is based on individualising environmental events. That observers from outside may identify the physical closeness to nature in Bidayuh villages as kind of romantic ideal handed down purely from past generations and conserved in small remote communities is due to those observers usual remoteness from natural reality and their unfamiliarity with present life in nature. ‘Outside observers’ may project their thoughts about a human past on recent

appearances of closeness to nature, which leads to the illusion of seeing and interpreting “natural people” as if they were samples of early developments. The connectedness to nature leading to a more consistent way of ideological thinking, so it seems, did not change principally since a long period of modern human development as stated by environmental psychologists (Schultz *et al.*, 2004; Stern & Dietz, 1994). This insight may apply also on those communities living in close proximity to nature.

The relationship between man and nature on Borneo shows partly that early literature failed to understand the world as a whole and the perception of environment as being mutually dependent on each other's world views. However, human prospects analysed in early literature still have an impact on natural and cultural representation of Borneo's diverse communities. Therefore,

“it is also becoming apparent that the magnitude of the environmental problems we face necessitate a broader intervention aimed at changing our cultural world view” (Mayer & McPherson Frantz, 2004).

Besides other improvements proposed by various social sciences, psychologists and environmentalists in educating ‘outside observers’ thus trying to cause primary response in developing environmental intelligence, the secondary effect of external written sources about unwritten social history should not be ignored as it is a tool of self positioning within nature. Fortunately in environmental psychology of the beginning 21st century, efforts have moved away from specific approaches to broader conceptualisations of the relationship of man to nature naming cultural values (Stern & Dietz, 1994; Stern, 2000), how concern and understanding for nature can be increased through empathy (Schultz, 2000), and how one's identity is shaped by the natural environment (Clayton & Opatow, 2003). Nature and Man, so to say, is everywhere in the world a sensitive issue (Moran, 2006: 32) and relies to a great part on what Orr described as progress in human intelligence, he says

“The surest sign of the maturity of intelligence is the evolution of biocentric wisdom” (Orr, 2004: 52).

How this biocentric wisdom is differently represented in diverse cultures should be – on the other hand – subject of studies dealing with external descriptions and internal experiences drawn from

expressive culture in a balanced way to which this article might be one contribution.

Additionally to the partly non-realistic projection of historical understanding of present day communities on Borneo, dualisms characterising relationships such as nature – culture, myth – truth, or life – art cause a simplified imagination of what drives communities to be creative and innovative. And a last aspect should not be forgotten, which is the often applied view on the creation of the world itself that puts human and nature as opposing each other with a God or God-like subject set outside of both. This might have been the most influential meaning behind many early descriptions of Borneo's communities (Segal, 2004: 42).

Space and Time

In a map of the Tourism Board of Sarawak, Kuching, the rough distribution of different communities sharing Sarawak as their living space is shown. The map and the attached explanation are reducing communities culturally on language families. Nevertheless, these cultural spaces are further evidence of remarkable diversity even in small parts such as Padawan. The map is addressed to anonymous tourists from Malaysia and abroad. The way how different communities are depicted, however, says something that is connected to cultural and natural representation possibly deriving from expectations nurtured through early and modern adventure and travel literature.

Many of the communities mentioned in the overview have good contacts to Kalimantan, among them the Bidayuh and some of their subgroups, on which I will focus later in detail. Nevertheless, the map does not allow for expanding spatial thinking. The Bidayuh are represented by a pose of the “eagle dance”, a symbol that summarises a great part of partly biased ideas about the traditions and present living conditions of the Bidayuh. It focuses on an activity that is rather being expected from outside observers than practised in daily life as if traditional dancing reflects a certain social stage of development typically for the indicated living space. Enjoying dance might be seen positively, however, compared to the other depicted communities of Iban, Malay and Selakau, the symbolised Bidayuh will not be very different in modern life conceptions and celebrate