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IBAN TRADITIONAL SOCIETY REFLECTIONS ON SOME DIALECTICAL THEMES

Clifford Sather

The nature of traditional Than society is a matter of some contenti on among anthropologists.

It is not my intent in this paper to review the whole of this debate. Instead, I want to describe some salient features of traditional society that seem to me to be distinctive to the Iban. With apologies to the serious Ibanists, I tried to keep this descriptionas brief and generalas possible.

The principal point I want to make in this paper is that these salient features, or continuities, have the form, not so much of fixed and unambiguous rules of action, but, rather of paradoxes, or to borrow the terms of Stanley Tambiah (1972) (from his perceptive essay, “The Persistence and Transformation of Tradition in Southeast Asia”, In Eisenstadt, ed. *Post Traditional Societies*) of *dialectical themes* or *tensions*. In other words, the features I want to talk about exist, I would argue, in a state of mutual tension, and, though persistent,are capable of cystallizing,or coming together, in a variety of ways.

In my thinking about the traditional society of the Iban, I have been strongly influenced by a long and, to my mind, brilliant essay, written by Professor Derek Freeman,our foremost authority on Iban social organization, called *Some Reflections on the Nature of Iban Society (1981)*.

Professor Freeman tells us that he wrote this essay, in the first instance, in order to set the ethnographic record straight and to answer what he sees as some serious misrepresentations of Iban institutions in the literature. But the essay goes beyond that to raise issues that have long challenged students of Iban society.

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Jabatan Muzium Sarawak

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REFLECTIONS ON SOME DIALECTICAL THEMES

by

Clifford Sather

INTRODUCTION

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EQUALITY

In the first paragraph of *Some Reflections,* Professor Freeman introduces the first, and, perhaps, most striking dialectical theme in Iban social organisation. This is its egalitarian character.