



The Sarawak Museum Journal

Vol. LIV No. 75

December 1999



ISSN: 0375-3050

E-ISSN: 3036-0188

Citation: Zainal Kling. (1999). Culture in the New Reality: A Conceptual Framework. The Sarawak Museum Journal, LIV (75): 1-13

CULTURE IN THE NEW REALITY: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Zainal Kling

CULTURE

Culture is perhaps the most overworked concept in any language. Not only has it been stretched to cover more areas of concern but also over loaded with more meanings. Today, culture covers an area stretching from the individual sentiment to national character and from routine office work to the most deep seated values and emotion. Perhaps that is what culture really is encompassing every detail of human individual and group characteristics stretching into the depth of human histories. The net impact of this stretching is the cumulation of vagueness in the definition and conception of culture.

For most writers culture has always been defined along the century-year old Tylorian definition that "culture is a complex whole encompassing the arts, law as the product of human group". This materialistic definition has to compete also with other more symbolic and ideational formulation where symbols and meaning are emphasized to indicate a more implicit content of culture: 'Culture refers to the taken-for-granted and problematic web of significance and meaning that human beings produce and act on when they do things together'. For the purpose of this paper I would like to go a little step away from both extremities by taking a more processual perspective in that culture is the adaptive activities of individuals and groups of people within the context of their human ecology.

CULTURE IN THE NEW REALITY: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

by

Zainal Kling

CULTURE

Culture is perhaps the most overworked concept in any language. Not only has it been stretched to cover more areas of concern but also over loaded with more meanings. Today, culture covers an area stretching from the individual sentiment to national character and from routine office work to the most deepseated values and emotion. Perhaps that is what culture really is – encompassing every detail of human individual and group characteristics stretching into the depth of human histories. The net impact of this stretching is the cumulation of vagueness in the definition and conception of culture.

For most writers culture has always been defined along the century-year old Tylorian definition that “culture is a complex whole encompassing the arts, law as the product of human group”. This materialistic definition has to compete also with other more symbolic and ideational formulation where symbols and meaning are emphasized to indicate a more implicit content of culture: ‘Culture refers to the taken-for-granted and problematic web of significance and meaning that human beings produce and act on when they do things together’. For the purpose of this paper I would like to go a little step away from both extremities by taking a more processual perspective in that culture is the adaptive activities of individuals and groups of people within the context of their human ecology.

The emphasis here is not only on the materialistic creation and invention of artifacts by human collectivities, the ideas emanating from their creativities through interactions with the physical environment but also on the institutional structures created and invented in the move towards mastering and controlling the environment. There is also a suggestion here to provide a space for the role of the individuals in the creation of culture as part of social actions or a completely individualistic idiosyncrasies. I would not necessarily want to be too ecological in the approach as if jumping on to the contemporary band wagon of environmental concern. The ecological context seems to me an imperative in the location and existence of any cultural forms. It would be unthinkable that a society and its culture could exist without its ecological location. While it is possible, for heuristic sake, to discuss and

understand a social or cultural phenomenon purely of its nature and function without the ecological context yet the very existence, maintenance and perpetuation of any system or entity in its human actions and activities must take into consideration its human physical location. Only if and when the ecology is understood to maintain and preserve human groups then only is culture realized as the product of eco-human interactions. This would have a tremendous implications on the current cultural discourse.

Having provided the broad definition, we would have to be a little more specific in our treatment of the topic. Our real concern relates to the areas of cultural existence and its implications for the future. The meaning of broad cultural context and development, the movement of cultural ideas at various levels of human existence – community, national, regional and international and the impact of cultural ideas within and outside the local and national boundaries. In a more definite terms we are trying to understand the existence, functions and meaning of local and national cultures in the context of the current general trends in human society at regional and global levels. The interest is to attempt at defining and clarifying the characteristics of local culture and its justification for existence in a future scenario of compellingly complete globalisation – a situation understood as a process of acculturation based on Western cultural forms and content as a New Reality.

THE PRESENT AND NEW REALITY

Futurists' dreams and understanding of the new reality may not necessarily be the real and final truth. No one perhaps can actually foresee the future even to a day. Numerous crises and changes had occurred in our lifetime within the last couple of decades to remind us of the risks of painting and portraying definite scenarios only to grieve in painful mistakes and unpredictable projection. Right now we are in the throes of an unexpectedly rapid economic meltdown, down turn and crashes, anguished in the experience that its sliding movement is as rapid as, if not more than, the scenario of growth that we were willing project for our economy in the Asian region. Our earlier confidence and planning action were almost completely buttressed by what is now understood as a false expectation of the market economy. Perhaps also we have trusted too much the vagueries of sentiments upon which market capitalism and economics are constructed as reflected by the fluctuation of burses and stock exchanges.

Watching the hour-by-hour fluctuation of the price indices in the stock exchanges we are constantly aware of a whole range affective factors cited by financial analysts' reports of the 'confidence' buyers and sentiment of sellers in the market in the sale and purchase of stocks and shares and in the