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### SYMBOLISM IN THE GAWIA OF THE BIDAYUH: A CASE STUDY ON THE BIDAYUH BAU-SINGAI GAWIA SOWA

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## INTRODUCTION

Culture influences every part of human life, including their attitudes and perception towards the world around them. In general, culture can be defined as a shared way of life of a group of people, covering all aspects of life and evolving through time (Hofstede, 1984; Tung, 1996). Asma (1996) in Sarok & Mamit (2003) stated that culture is

...a way of life of members of a society...culture is therefore a collection of behaviour patterns relating to thought, manners and actions which members of a society have shared, learned and passed on to succeeding generations... in order for 'a culture to exist, its members need to have shared meanings, shared understanding and shared sense-making (p. 149).

According to Andrew (2003), culture consists of four basic components - symbols, language, values and norms (p. 40). Thio (1994) stated that culture consists of different components and that symbol is part of the nonmaterial component. "Symbols enable us to create, communicate, share, and transmit to the next generation the other components of culture. It is through symbols that we get immersed in culture and in the process become fully human" (p. 36). All aspects of a culture are symbolic and that they all have their own meanings, although the association between a symbol and what it symbolises is usually arbitrary and conventional. Different cultures around the world have different symbols associated with them and most of these are shown through their daily lives especially festivals.

For one indigenous group of Sarawak, the Bidayuh, there are many symbols, which are significant to them and their culture. Peter (2000) described the Bidayuh culture as "their values attitudes, as well as their customs, traditions and their perception of life" (p. 128). Within the traditional Bidayuh society, these symbols, which are closely connected to their animistic beliefs, can be seen in their daily lives especially during the festivals or *Gawia*. One particular festival that is given much attention to is the *Gawia Sowa* (Patrick, 2002)<sup>1</sup>. The traditional Bidayuh societies believed in the spiritual world. In fact, their lifestyles revolved around the spirits and its world and these symbols, which are believed to be sacred, are part of that spiritual world.

## AIM OF THE STUDY

The main focus of this paper was to examine the significant symbols in the Bidayuh Singai *Gawia Sowa*. Specific aspects being focused were on the most essential symbolic elements in the *Gawia Sowa* and the importance of these symbols in the *Gawia* and in the lives of the Bidayuh, particularly the Bisingai.

## The Bidayuh of Sarawak

The Bidayuh is the third largest ethnic group in Sarawak after the Iban and Malay. However, they only make up about 8% of the total population. There are 335 Bidayuh villages in the Kuching and Kota Samarahan Divisions (Chang, 2002). According to Chang, the Bidayuh originated from the Sungkung area in Kalimantan, Indonesia. From there, they migrated