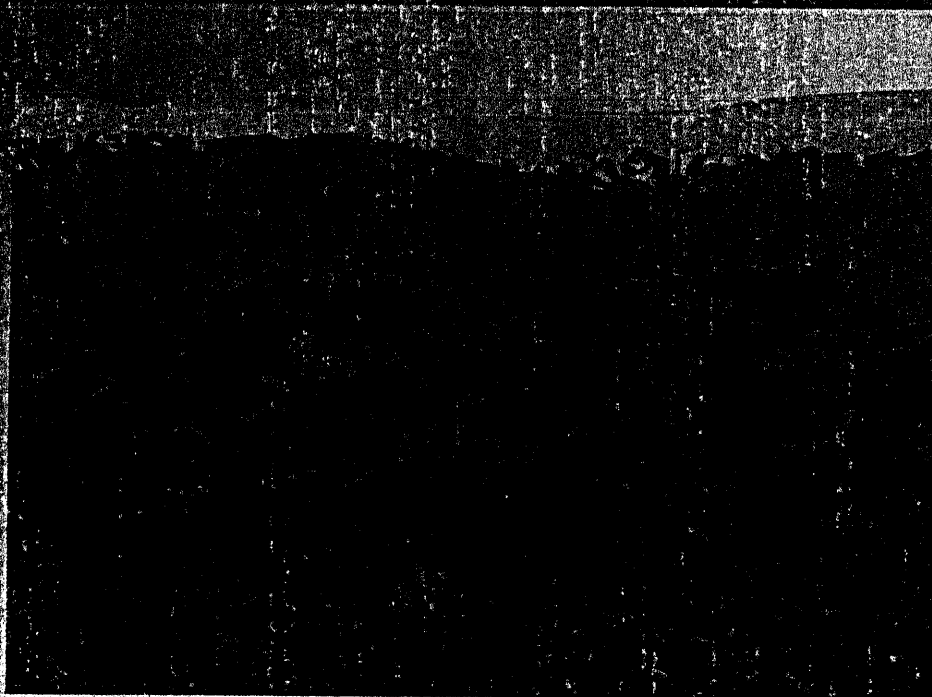


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Between Difference and Synergy: Cultural Issues in an International Research Scheme

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1 Introduction

The contributions in this reader document the result of two years of research in an intercultural context. It has been managed by joint German-Indonesian planning and steering committees, and it has been conducted in close co-operation between more than 100 German (including a few other European nationals) and Indonesian scholars and researchers, both parts being equally represented in numbers.

Conventional conceptions may suggest that in the field of scientific research, which is assumed to be universally characterized by "rationality" and "objectivity", there is only little room for cultural variations. Yet, two years of scientific co-operation, which aimed at determining crucial factors of stabilization and destabilization in rainforest margins, have demonstrated the profound impact of cultural values, views and behaviour on the research process. This refers in particular to modes of communication, co-operation and management, but it also includes basic approaches towards scientific work.

The research scheme on "Stability of Rainforest Margins" (STORMA) has been designed as a joint German-Indonesian project. In this capacity it has to recognize culture as a crucial factor, if it wants to fully develop its potentials. This includes both preventing destructive emotional and procedural disturbances and utilizing cultural diversity as an asset which eventually may produce synergies. However, such effects do not emerge by themselves. They rather result from conscious processes of cultural learning, reflexion, understanding and adaptation.

Considering the given variety of culturally determined orientations, the joint management and research process went on remarkably well. This is not to say that frictions and misunderstandings have not occurred - many of which may even have escaped the awareness of the actors as being cultural in nature. However, intercultural communication and co-operation has made considerable progress, particularly in the context of field research, though it may be premature to refer to synergetic effects already at this stage. In such a situation, which is characterized by a kind of self-steering mutual acculturation process, it would be counterproductive to expose the cultural factor too much to extensive deliberation. One can literally drown cultural awareness by assuming that everything is related to culture and by constantly trying to surface the cultural factor. Yet, as will be commented upon later, we emphasize that culture is an omnipresent (though often hidden) "orientation system" (Thomas 1999c). At the same time, we rather desist from Hofstede's definition, who once referred to culture as a "collective programming of mind" (Hofstede 1997). It is precisely the experience of two years of intensive intercul-

tural contact which tells us that, on the one hand, culture is a significant variable in co-operation but, on the other hand, the individual person is more than his or her culture. If it weren't so, what could we expect from cross-cultural learning?

Acknowledging individuality as a prime source of behaviour and scientific mode of work and, at the same time, recognizing and appreciating that a good part of our individual profile is culturally determined, is basic to STORMA's approach towards research and research management in an intercultural context. It is this attitude which guided the focus-group discussions of an intercultural workgroup, on which this article is based. It was held during the STORMA "International Symposium on the Stability of Rainforest Margins" in Bogor, September 29 – October 2, 2002, and it aimed at defining, sharing and documenting the experience of cultural difference in the co-operation of the past two years.

2 Culture as Orientation System

Among the various formulations and definitions of culture, this article finds the one from Alexander Thomas (1999c, p 3) as the most comprehensive one. He defines culture as :

"...a universal orientation system, also typical of a society, nation, organisation or group. This orientation is formed by specific symbols, such as language, meaningful signs, and typical behavior, and is handed down within the specific society or group, etc. It influences perception, thinking, evaluation and the behavior of all members and thus defines their membership of their society. The orientation system enables society members to master their environment in complex social fields and promotes smooth and effective co-operation".

The definition views culture in its broad sense and focuses on its dynamic nature. That is, the term 'culture' comprises an integrated human function in experiencing, comprehending and responding to the surroundings. Furthermore, culture is perceived as a result of socialization, i.e. it is learned and continuously adapted to its social context. Thus, the above definition provides an appropriate basis for understanding the intercultural issues discussed below.

The first issue is the urge to define the scope of cultural problems at work, to draw a line separating work problems and cultural problems. Following the logic of culture as an orientation system means to affirm that such a line does not exist. It means, culture influences individuals' thinking and behaviour in working contexts. Hence, a large number of work-related problems can be traced back to their cultural origins.

Another important issue is the classic nature-nurture dichotomy. The debate focuses on whether being culturally adaptive is attributed to personality tendencies or to learned skills. According to the definition, culture most likely covers both polars. Individuals acquire culture through socialization, an indication of the existence of social learning experiences. However, at the point when it has been acquired, the orientation system becomes a part of the individual's identity. Culture, then, is an aspect of personality. It is in this sense that we can understand the de-

gree of flexibility in adapting to different cultures. The two-fold influence of culture is clear, as culture "...offers facilities and stimuli towards behavior, but also imposes conditions and limits" (Boesch 1980 in Thomas 1999c, p 3). Consequently, there are people who are able to adjust easily to cultural differences and there are those who fail to adapt without proper cultural preparation.

Most important, pointing out learning aspects of culture means setting the focus on its developmental nature rather than its deterministic one. To perceive culture as an endstate is a major constraint in developing models for intercultural communication. This view neglects the changing and dynamic process of culture and therefore is less effective to meet the demand of human interaction processes.

3 Intercultural Problems: The Challenge of Culture Contacts

Intercultural situations are characterised by encounters of different orientation systems. Since culture guides individuals in their social interactions, including the working contexts, it is reasonable to assume that communication and work in such situations are more difficult and less efficient. The interaction becomes more complex because "...customary behavior, thinking and emotions overlap with what seems unusual and strange" (Thomas 1999c, p 3). Concepts and behaviour are either completely different so that they mutually appear as irrational, or they are seemingly similar yet carrying different meanings. Confusions, doubts, and distrust may be the results, leading in turn to friction and conflict.

Studies on intercultural groups highlight conflict sources which have emerged as consequences of cultural misunderstandings or incompatibilities. Some of these areas are: interpersonal relationship, task accomplishment process, stereotypes and prejudices (Brislin 1993); the role of national culture, leadership style, national management style (Shuter & Wiseman 1994); communication style, environmental and economic factors (Teboul et al. 1994). Specifically, Tjitra (2001) reveals main conflicting sources of Indonesia-German workgroups. Some of them are: asymmetrical power structure, communication style, problem solving style and working style. That is, the difference between the Indonesian and the German national culture is so distinct that it leads to different patterns in accomplishing group tasks. The differences eventually lead to communication failures and interpersonal misunderstandings. For instance, the Indonesians refer to their indirect communication style and subordinate structural positions as obstacles to the optimal expression of their initiatives, and therefore perceive unequal opportunities between Germans and Indonesians in the group.

Within STORMA, three major issues can be identified in this context:

- *Communication*

Basically, the problem is rooted in conflicting communication styles. The Indonesian pattern of indirect communication is incompatible with the German direct communication style. A typical example of the communication problem is the high rate of failure to keep appointments on the Indonesian side.

- *Work-ethic*

Problems in this area cover issues of work commitment and working style. The Germans (and a few Indonesians) mentioned that Indonesians often pursue activities and tasks irrelevant to the project. Accordingly, that conduct leads them to perceive that Indonesians put project works at lower priority than those side-line activities. This situation has its impact in the form of slower work pace. Another point contributing to emotional stress in daily working situations is the unsystematic pattern in doing the task.

- *Power*

The group mentioned unbalanced power structure in the research scheme as a source of conflict. Realistically, it is admitted that the structure of the project is, to a certain extent, pre-set. Accordingly, the focus is on how to manage the given structure rather than to change it. The asymmetrical structure creates different levels of autonomy and, up to a certain point, gives way to possessive attitudes towards the project and its facilities. As an example, different levels of user rights in the laboratory were mentioned.

Looking into the above problems, it becomes clear that cultural challenges in Indonesian-German work groups are real. In order to put these challenges into their contextual meanings, we try to look at them from an Indonesian and a German cultural perspective.

4 Indonesia and Germany: Basic Cultural Values

Knowing Indonesian and German cultural values, one cannot help concluding that both cultures are very different. Empirical studies evidently convey affirmation to that conclusion. The two cultures are located at opposite ends of almost every cultural dimension (see Hofstede 1997; Adler 1991). These facts are either discouraging or challenging for those involved in Indonesian-German work groups. One thing is certain, though: knowledge of and familiarity with values of both cultures become a vital necessity for the members. Accordingly, this section discusses German and Indonesian core values in order to promote mutual understanding.

German Work Values

Sources on German cultural values agree that work is regarded as an important part of one's identity. German society takes work as a serious matter and, therefore, work-related values are pronounced strongly as major guidance for the na-

tion. Max Weber has referred to this value complex as "protestant ethics", which still plays a significant role in the present (Craig 1991). It comprises, among others, industrious attitude (e.g. hard work, discipline, rule-orientation) and personal achievement, which are rated as particularly high in the scale of values (compare : Craig 1991; Hall & Hall 1990; Peabody 1985).

Another signified value in German culture refers to rationality and objective thinking (Hall & Hall 1990; Peabody 1985). Like the work ethics, the rational and objective thinking patterns are rooted in the society as the legacy of a major historical idea, i.e. the period of enlightenment (Craig 1991; see also Panggabean 2001).

Indonesian Social Values

Though Indonesia is a multi-cultural society, we shall concentrate here on the Javanese culture, due to its majority status and widespread influence across the nation (see Panggabean 2001 for more details).

As it is common in many Asian cultures such as, for instance, the Japanese and Chinese, Indonesia's primary cultural value is the idea of harmony (Magnis-Suseno 1996; Mulder 2001). However, even more than in most other Asian countries, the principle of harmony has a very strong impact on social life in the Indonesian context, expressing itself in a "harmonious social appearance" (Geertz in Magnis-Suseno 1996, p 40). Basically, harmony is rooted in the Javanese spiritual concept that the universe is arranged in harmonious order and the main human task is to preserve this harmony. Hence, a harmonious condition is something preserved, not something achieved. In its socially transformed existence, the idea of preserving harmony results in various conflict avoidance mechanisms and indirect ways to convey negative messages (Brandt 1997). In accordance with this principle, Indonesian society makes a clear distinction between open and discreet conflict. Open conflicts should be avoided since they are harmful to harmony, but it does not mean that the culture forbids conflict completely. It is rather a matter of how to perform conflicts.

Another important value is the concept of *rasa*. According to Geertz (1964), the concept has a dual meaning. The first one is 'feeling' and the second one is 'meaning'. That is, one should use one's refined feelings to acquire the true meaning. A refined *rasa* is an important indicator of maturity and significant for harmony preservation. *Rasa* is manifested in sensitivity characteristics of Indonesians (see Panggabean 2001). Discussions on harmony and *rasa* as Indonesian central values clearly demonstrate that Indonesian society highly values smooth and subtle conducts, even to express power (Anderson 1990). The Indonesian indirect communication style should be viewed particularly from this perspective.

Cultural Perspectives of STORMA Problems

Considering both frameworks discussed, it becomes evident that the two cultures imply diverging standpoints as they enter the working context. Indonesians

focus strongly on the social-harmonious aspect, whereas Germans concentrate on the work-related aspects. It is then understandable that the meeting of the two cultures under working conditions is prone to misunderstandings and conflict.

The differential *communication style* is the first problematic area. The German style is direct and straightforward, striving after a speedy common perspective and objective, a matter-of-fact pattern in dealing with things. On the other hand, Indonesians prefer an indirect style for completely different reasons. The indirect style is a suitable way to deal with the existing socio-cultural heterogeneity, attended by a high level of uncertainty and a high probability of intergroup problems. Moreover, in German culture honesty is highly rated as an indicator of individual integrity. Indonesian indirectness, *de facto* a pattern which serves to maintain harmony and to avoid insult, is easily misinterpreted from this perspective as a sign of insincerity.

Regarding the *work values*, German work ethics are firmly established: discipline, commitment and responsibility are values which enjoy a high appreciation in working contexts. On the other hand, the most important working condition for Indonesians is the existence of a comfortable working atmosphere. This is not to say that Indonesians are not prepared to work in a less comfortable work climate, but they would rather sacrifice their motivation and commitment for the sake of a more comfortable working atmosphere.

The different emphasis put on intercultural sensitivity illustrates how both cultures vary in the rating of social aspects in the working context. However, the empirical findings also disclose considerable learning capacities within German-Indonesian teams as to the mutual understanding and appreciation of such work related values. By revealing common characteristics of intercultural sensitivity in mixed work groups, Panggabean (2001) indicates that both cultures can learn to draw close to each other while maintaining culture-specific characteristics.

Discussing *power issues* in Indonesian-German work groups presupposes the consideration how Indonesian and German cultures perceive hierarchy. Hierarchy is important in both cultures. Even though, according to Hofstede's seminal work (1997), the German culture is less hierarchical than the Indonesian, it is considered as more hierarchy oriented than most western cultures (Hall & Hall 1990). The crucial point in both cultures is how they manage hierarchy. The German performance could be classified as a "direct" one, though individuals tend to perceive and accept the power structure in a quite relaxed way. Interactions are characterised by sufficient autonomy and space for the development or maintenance of an independent attitude. Hierarchy is not supposed to prevent independent initiatives or critical discussions. On the other hand, in accordance with the highly valued *rasa*, Indonesians manage hierarchy in a much more indirect and smoother way. Persons in power are expected to exercise it without overly displaying it (Anderson 1990; Magnis-Suseno 1996). However, among Indonesians the strong hierarchical order is clearly sensed. Hence, the crucial point for Indonesian-German workgroups on this point is more how power is conveyed rather than whether it is recognized.

Summing up, it may be stated that German-Indonesian work groups need to manage their cultural differences, if they want to maximise their efficiency and

productivity. Though the management of cultural differences is, as mentioned above, anything but an easy task, the discussions in the STORMA intercultural work group revealed some positive signs of mutual cultural learning. These indications will be discussed below.

5 Optimizing the Advantages of Intercultural Work Groups

Though research regarding the effects of cultural diversity in work groups is not totally conclusive, a large number of studies confirm the benefits of cultural diversity in promoting creativity and synergetic achievements (see Cox 1994). Empirical evidence of synergetic potentials in German-Indonesian work groups has been provided, among others, by Zeuschel (1999) and Tjitra (2001). Such findings conform to increasing realizations of the advantages of culturally diverse work groups (see e.g. Thomas 1999a).

In its discussions, the STORMA work group agreed on the fact that the intercultural profile of the research program constitutes a major challenge to all researchers and administrators involved. Though difficulties in cross-cultural adaptation were not denied, there was a unanimous feeling that intercultural learning has occurred on both sides, and that this learning process is about to open up hidden potentials. Below are some conclusions and perceptions which have been mentioned in this regard.

Moving Towards Power Balance

The first 2 years of intercultural co-operation in the STORMA context have witnessed a gradual shift from an asymmetric distribution of power towards a greater power balance. This has been highlighted by the group as a major (though still fragmentary) breakthrough in the intercultural design of the research program. In particular, the increasing involvement of Indonesian research supervisors was rated as an indicator for change in the distribution of power and authority. Both studies which have dealt in depth with the problems and potentials of German-Indonesian workgroups (Panggabean 2001; Tjitra 2001) emphasize the crucial role of power distribution in intercultural ventures. It largely determines the climate of work, the determination to make the joint project a success, and the willingness to adopt a learning attitude with regard to characteristics of the other culture.

Willingness to Learn

Irrespective of genuine difficulties in understanding and accepting some peculiarities of the other culture, an overall readiness towards intercultural learning and to adjust to new ways of thinking and acting was emphasized. This should be valued as an important precondition of promoting cultural sensitivity. Basically, the willingness to learn and to approach another culture with an open mind and flexibility are identified as essential indicators for intercultural effectiveness. These qualities

repeatedly occur as competences needed to overcome distress and frustrations in processes of cultural adjustment (see Panggabean 2001).

Developing Synergies

Creating intercultural synergies in joint research efforts is a complex and difficult process. Yet, the group agreed in identifying complementary competencies and skills in the interculturally composed research schemes. For instance, the Indonesian flexibility and ability to cope with unexpected situations or results may productively complement the German tendency towards advance planning and prognoses (see Stumpf & Zeuschel 1999). Thus, the seemingly oppositional cultural tendencies of Indonesians and Germans, which come near the methodological differentiation between "inductive" and "deductive", could both benefit the cooperation when they are seen and treated as complementary. This could be reinforced by a mutual learning process which includes the supplementation of one's own cultural habits by some practices of the other culture.

Such experiences, which could be acknowledged as initial synergetic effects, have been gained in the process of STORMA research. It is believed that they will help to move towards true synergy by combining different views of reality into a shared one with new and peculiar qualities. Actually, some of the papers presented in this volume, which have been co-authored by German and Indonesian scientists, clearly point into this direction.

The Role of Intercultural Mediators

Intercultural learning, establishing a power balance and moving towards synergetic effects are processes in intercultural teams which rarely grow by themselves. Nor can they be "prescribed" in a top-down approach. Initiating and sustaining such processes rather depend on the influence of individuals who are familiar with both cultural frameworks and therefore have the potential to develop culturally-adequate behavior for both parties. The concept of the 'mediating person' has been around for decades (Bochner 1981; Adler 1974), and Panggabean (2001) has emphasized the role of mediating persons as intercultural facilitators in Indonesian-German work groups.

It can be regarded as fortunate that STORMA has at its disposal a few of such individuals in various functions, both with Indonesian and German cultural background. They act as communication catalysts, enabling effective communication between cultures. They perform their roles by customizing the message and the way it is conveyed in order to adjust it to the given cultural framework. They have the capability to actively perform cultural empathy, and to transform cultural knowledge into constructive action. In short, the existence of these individuals is valuable since they are highly appreciated by members from both cultures and thus are able to prevent or mediate group conflicts.

6 Conclusions

It remains uncontested that the joint endeavour to find sustainable solutions for the interaction between man and natural environment in the case of rainforests constitutes an outstanding and world-wide challenge, which demands not only interdisciplinary but also intercultural approaches. As increasing heterogeneity is a concomitant phenomenon of work groups, systematic efforts are needed to manage cultural differences. In the context of Indonesian-German work groups, as in the case of STORMA, the marked distance between the two cultures affects the work accomplishment and potentially leads into conflict situations. However difficult it seems, it is a common conviction that these challenges are manageable, and that a proper management of cultural differences may even lead the group into some sort of synergy.

While it is confirmed that STORMA has some advantageous characteristics, systematic and deliberate efforts are still needed in the field of intercultural learning. To learn culture in a systematic way is frequently referred to as a beginning to promote synergy (Thomas 1999c; Brislin et al. 1983; Albert 1994). Though the benefits of intercultural training are not totally uncontested (Ward et al. 2001), accumulated works over decades suggest that individuals involved in intercultural assignments would benefit from some kind of systematic preparation and training, enabling them to cope with cultural challenges.

Based on these considerations, the STORMA discussion group brought forward the following recommendations to increase the intercultural performance in the STORMA research scheme:

- *Individual cultural preparation prior to the assignments.* This preparation should take the form of information-gathering, targeted at raising the level of cultural knowledge. This first stage of culture learning normally implies the cognitive acquisition of culture-related information, like norms, values, habits, symbols etc.. The learning materials are books, films, or any relevant documents. This kind of learning is the most practical and easy to access, but it also has many limitations, since the information is often too general and does not include the behavioral dimension (Ward et al. 2001).
- *Exposure to supervised real or simulated second-culture experiences* (Ward et al. 2001). This learning process is based on situational cases as well as on concrete experiences from work practices in the host country. Experiential learning is evidently more effective than the pure cognitive approach, due to the greater personal involvement of the learner (Ward et al. 2001). A typical technique is role-playing with members from the host culture, providing a chance for the learner to experience the local interaction patterns.
- *Intercultural learning in mixed teams.* Positive learning effects can be particularly expected from learning situations, where both cultures are represented and, if possible, incidents of immediate and common interest are shared and reflected. This concerns first of all project members who are interacting in the field, having experienced actual situations of cultural diversity. The major po-

tential of the mixed team approach lies in the mutuality of learning. It follows the principle that, irrespective of host and guest roles, intercultural communication and management needs awareness and understanding among all actors involved.

- *Intercultural coaching.* This learning approach provides opportunities for discussion or sharing with individuals, who can provide cultural insights or practical solutions in immediate field problems. The coach thus assumes the role of a project-attendant and *ad hoc* available consultant, who is accepted by all sides concerned as a neutral person with adequate intercultural knowledge and communicative skills. In this role, the coach may take over crucial functions not only in facilitating intercultural understanding and preventing or mitigating conflicts, but also in creating a mutual basis on which synergies can develop (Zeutschel 1999).

The above-mentioned steps towards the improvement of joint Indonesian-German research indicate the efforts which have to be invested in order to optimize the intercultural composition of the research scheme. On the whole, these efforts comprise three major steps: (1) to develop an awareness about cultural differences, (2) to avoid the threats (e.g. in terms of misunderstandings and offenses), which different systems of orientation may have for a beneficial cooperation, and (3) to exploit the huge opportunities embodied in the intercultural composition of the research scheme.

The latter refers to the creation of synergies in the research process which somehow implies the vision of a joint "STORMA culture" with its own system of orientation. Though a vision is something which one may never totally achieve, it provides guidance for efforts in intercultural learning. And these efforts deserve high priority and attention if synergies are to be attained – or, as U. Zeutschel has appropriately put it: "synergy is not for free" (Zeutschel 1999, p 6).

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