

*King Siliman and Other Bidayuh Folk Tales.* Compiled by Robert Sulis Ridu, Ritikos Jitab, and Jonas Noeb. Dayak Studies Monographs, Oral Literature Series, no. 1, 2001. xvi, 138 pp. *Suket: Penan Folk Stories.* Compiled by Jayl Langub. Dayak Studies Monographs, Oral Literature Series, no. 2, 2001. xii, 198 pp. *Apai Alui Becomes a Shaman and Other Iban Comic Tales.* Compiled by Clifford Sather, Dayak Studies Monographs, Oral Literature Series, no. 3, 2001. xiii, 181 pp. All published by Kota Samarahan, Sarawak: Institute of East Asian Studies, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak.

For maximum impact, the first three monographs of the Dayak Studies Program within the Institute of East Asian Studies at Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) were published at the same time, all of them with the same attractive cover design and with a focus on indigenous folktales. The structure and format are also the same in each volume: there is a brief biography of the story-tellers, an explanatory introduction by the compilers to provide a cultural context for the tales and the circumstances of recording, and then the collection of stories; in each monograph an English translation is provided along with the original version in Bidayuh, Penan, and Iban respectively. The stories are illustrated with nicely produced and amusing black-and-white line-drawings.

One of the objectives of the Dayak Studies Program, launched in January 2001 and led by Professor Clifford Sather, who holds the Chair of Dayak Studies at UNIMAS, is to gather, store, study, and disseminate material on the oral literature of the native populations of Borneo, both to preserve what is in danger of being lost and to document changes in the expressive arts. In this endeavour the Program, funded by the Dayak Cultural Foundation, has joined forces with the Tun Jugah Foundation, which concentrates on research on the Iban community, and the government-funded Majlis Adat Istiadat, which has a substantial storehouse of Dayak oral literature, in order to ensure that local oral forms are recorded for posterity. In this regard it has carried on the excellent work previously undertaken by the Borneo Literature Bureau. Following its incorporation into the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, the

Bureau became a state publishing arm of the national publishing house and took on several other duties so that the original focus on the publication of vernacular materials gradually changed. Some of the original pieces published by the Bureau have since been translated into Bahasa Malaysia.

As Datuk Tra Zehnder says, in her Preface to the series, prior to the introduction of modern media into rural communities, folk-tales were not only one of the main sources of entertainment (usually told as bed-time stories to children, though also on occasion to large mixed audiences of adults and children), but they also held certain moral implications for the wider society. Moral advice or guidance, and cultural expectations about proper or appropriate behaviour and action were often conveyed in an amusing, light-hearted, and indirect way, using widely known devices such as the folk-hero, the foolish, proud, or envious individual, and the trickster figure. The stories captured too the natural and cultural landscapes within which Dayak societies were nurtured and developed; they offered explanations for particular human practices and institutions, for natural phenomena, for relations between humans and their environment, and for the specific behaviour and habitats of animals and birds. As Jayl Langub says of Penan tales, they “are used to mirror the realities of everyday Penan life” and they serve as “a repository of Penan knowledge, beliefs and values”.

Professor Sather reminds us, in his Foreword to the series, of the importance of this project because “in the face of rapid change, many of these narrative forms are in danger of being lost”, whilst others “are being radically reshaped or are assuming new cultural roles and meanings”. An important element in this work is also the making of sound recordings of most of the texts so that the richness, texture, and vitality of the spoken or sung word can be heard in the original.

The Bidayuh volume comprises ten tales (*dondan*) held in the Majlis Adat Istiadat, and gathered from five story-tellers, particularly Arthur Atos Langgi, an accomplished narrator. The ten Penan stories (*suket*), also from the Majlis collections, were gathered from eight story-tellers; seven of them are animal stories and three about human characters. The ten Iban stories (*ensera*) focus on the “comic hero”, fool, or trickster

figure, Apai Alui, about whom Sather has previously written a most valuable commentary and analysis. The tales were all collected by Sather from one of the most well known of the Iban story-tellers, Henry Gerijih, who was himself an early contributor to the Borneo Literature Bureau series.

These volumes will obviously be of interest to Borneo specialists and to those interested in oral literature. But, in a world of “canned” and instant entertainment, one hopes that these collections of stories, as well as serving to record the richness of local oral traditions, will be used as a resource to continue to entertain, amuse, guide, and inform those for whom they were originally created. All of the stories are also translated into a lively and very readable English, and should be read for pleasure and enjoyment by a wider audience.

Victor T. KING

---

Victor T. King is Director of the Graduate School and Professor of South-East Asian Studies at the University of Hull.