

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE



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## THE ORAL LITERATURE OF THE IBAN IN BORNEO

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### Abstract

This article examines the Iban oral literature (traditions) of the Iban society which includes fables, folklore, legends and myths that are orally transmitted and learned but continue to exist in oral form until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The objective of this article is stress the importance of oral literature in the Iban society because it is in this vast and incredibly beautiful literature that the cosmology of Iban society is revealed, and through this also the other people can perceive the soul of Iban culture. However, the Iban oral literature is very fragile as it remains in the memory of the elder generation who are rapidly dying out, and it may not survive long under the conditions of modernization. Therefore, the Iban society must preserve this oral literature in order to maintain its roots to the past as well as their dignity. Yet, this oral literature is critical for anthropological study because it provides information about the traditional Iban life. This article shows that, although the Iban lived in relatively isolated farming communities, they had the time to let their creativity expand and reveal or reflect the nature of their lives, their sorrows and joys, and their relationship through songs and chants, folklore, myths and legends, fables, stories and epics as well as riddles and sayings. This implicates that there is indeed an urgent need for immediate action to recover the dying oral literature because there is a sharp decline in the numbers of ritual specialists who can interpret the metaphors and words in the complex and aesthetic oral literature which contributes to the vast and accumulating universal knowledge of culture and traditions. It is significant to suggest that the Iban society must treasure their oral literature and translate these traditions before it is too late or dying out, as well as keeping it safe for them to appreciate and enjoy, otherwise this oral literature will be swallowed by the era of modernization in the Iban society itself.

**Keywords:** Metaphors, cultural, traditions, oral literature, modernization, folklore, chants, myths, fables, transmitted, cosmology, dignity.

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## Introduction

The Iban people are the largest ethnic group in the land of Borneo. They have spread throughout Sarawak in various coastal regions of Kuching, Saribas, Skrang, Lemanak, Batang Lupar, Lundu, Miri, Bintulu, Kapit, Limbang, Lawas and Sri Aman. This ethnic group is differentiated by dialect and they are related to the places of their settlements. Sather (1994)<sup>1</sup> is right when he says that the Ibans have identified themselves by the stream, a significant geographical feature near their residence. According to Sather, rivers formed a major focus of Iban social identities, thus become a riverine society, define by watershed boundaries. Those who live along the same river system tend to share common culture (McKeown, 1983)<sup>2</sup> and distinguish from other ethnic groups by differences of dialect, customs and *adat* (way of life).

Numerically, the Ibans are the largest indigenous population of Malaysian state of Sarawak. Moreover they are a widespread community and are found in all the four political units of Borneo – Sarawak, Sabah, Brunei Darussalam and Kalimantan. Today, the Ibans are approximately 800,000 in the state of Sarawak alone in 2013. The Ibans have lived harmoniously with other ethnic groups with whom they have interacted such as the Malays, Chinese, Bidayuh and the Orang Ulu. The dynamic relations between Iban and other ethnic groups have produced changes in the Iban society and culture (Vinson and Sutlive, 2001a)<sup>3</sup>. The uniqueness of culture has encouraged researchers from around the world to study Iban society and culture in order to make ethnographic record for future generations.

## Iban Oral Literature

The Iban oral literature or traditions of the Iban society includes fables, folklore, legends and myths. These traditions were orally transmitted and learned before the arrival of Rajah Brooke (Vinson and Sutlive, 2001c)<sup>4</sup> in Sarawak and they continue to exist in oral form until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The *Sarawak Museum Journal* together with the *Sarawak Gazette* published many scores of works and articles that have been transcribed and translated, thus preserved the oral literature and traditions. For example the publication of Harrison (1966)<sup>5</sup> and Rubenstein (1973)<sup>6</sup> has provided resources for researchers and scholars.

Previously, the Borneo Literature Bureau also had performed an invaluable service by printing many Iban literatures (stories) during the 1960s (Vinson and Sutlive, 2001c)<sup>4</sup>. However,

when Sarawak Literary Society and The Tun Jugah Foundation were established, they provided new forums for the Iban oral literature and traditions to be collected and published. Much of the oral literature and traditions have yet to be collected and analyzed by interested scholars and researchers. It must be mentioned here that the Iban oral literature includes all forms of information that are transmitted and learned. The forms include the Iban folklore (Sather, 1994)<sup>1</sup> which comprises of aphorisms (*jaku sema/sempana jaku*), chants (*timang/pengap*), dirges or laments (*sabak*), marchen and fairy tales, fables and legends (*jerita/jerita tuai*), myths and sagas (*ensera*), motifs and prayers (*sampi*), proverbs (*jaku dalam*), riddles (*entelah*), songs (*renung semain, renung sabung, renung kayau, renung sakit, wugi, wa'* and et cetera) and also genealogies (Sutlive, 1976)<sup>7</sup>.

Vinson and Sutlive divide the oral literature into four major units – the historical accounts, religious literature, myths and legends and the secular literature. The religious literature includes the long chants and songs which accompany ritual actions. On the other hand, the secular literature includes riddles, aphorisms, sayings and et cetera. Regarding the historical accounts of the Iban oral literature, Sandin (1967)<sup>8</sup> has been in the forefront of collecting these materials. According to Sather (1994)<sup>1</sup>, these historical accounts are important for the reconstruction or recreating the history of the Iban before any contact with the European people. Brown (1979)<sup>9</sup> explains this importance by arguing that historicity is a function of social change. Where there is no social change, there is little history. This Iban literature is indeed useful for its historical reconstruction.

The Iban religious oral literature includes the ritual poetry, either sung or spoken. This ritual poetry creates beautiful aesthetic performances with metaphors. Without this poetry the Iban culture is impoverished. Sather (1977)<sup>10</sup> records and translates the Iban first rites of harvest (*Nanchang Padi*) and reports (1980) on the prayers performed by the Iban on the ritual occasion. Sather also provides a translation of several *pelian* poetry texts, performed by shaman for healing and the prayers of Iban agricultural augury (1985).

Sandin (1967)<sup>8</sup> recorded and translated a text of the Gawai Burung rite and also translated a piece of Iban dirge called *sabak* (1966)<sup>11</sup>, while Masing (1981)<sup>12</sup> translated a text on the *Timang Gawai Amat* rite. It is suggested here that a number of oral texts from different regions and from various performers be collected so that a study can be made on the culture, language, narrative story and the Iban cosmology through these texts.

*Sampi* (supplications or prayers) are uttered at the beginning of some activity to implore the gods, the spirits or ancestors to heed the petitioner and bless his undertakings, for example, at the commencement of an agricultural cycle, when inviting the gods of the ancestors to transform the soil from its deficiencies to soil that is rich and productive. One who offers a prayer must accompany it with an appropriate *piring* (offering). Such supplications are always monologues. Normally, the Iban prayers “summon” the gods with the call to attention by repeating *huuuu-hah* three times. At times the summons is accompanied by the numbers *sa, dua, tiga, empat, lima,*

*enam* and *tuuuuujuh* (one through seven). One who performs the prayer holds a chicken, right hand round its feet, left hand under its breast, and waves the chicken around over the heads of the other participants of the supplication; and the chicken is slaughtered after the prayer, cooked and eaten by the participants.

Secondly, Iban oral literature is rich with myths, legends and legendary characters. To the Iban, legends are sacred narratives of origins, having to do with their culture mythical heroes and heroines such as Keling, Bunga Nuing, Kumang, Lulong, Indai Abang and the like. The stories mostly feature deeds of derring-do and the hero is always prevailing. But the heroines do not fare very well, often falling short in the tasks they undertake or caught out in their duplicity and they normally require aid from the male counterparts (Vinson and Sutlive, 2001b)<sup>13</sup>. It is interesting to note that the Iban mythology is vast and varied and they contain the narratives of the origins of the Ibans as well as the transformations that have brought Iban to the present day.

The Iban mythology provides an orientation to the universe in which the Iban live. For example, there are several myths of creation which recount how the various spheres of the universe like sky, earth and Otherworld (*Sebayan*) were created. In one familiar myth on creation, the god Raja Entala or Keri Raja Petara created two giant birds Ara and Irik. These two birds then created the world, but the expanse of the world was too large to fit beneath the sky. The birds Ara and Irik then compressed the world, thus producing the mountains and other topographic features. Another myth recounts that human beings were formed from clay (moulded earth) and brought to life with an infusion of the sap of *kumpang* tree.

Vinson and Sutlive (2001b)<sup>13</sup> also mention that the Iban personify the natural forces as anthropomorphic beings that brought the world into existence. These are the creator gods in the creation myths and they are identified by their names rhyme (in the Iban language) with part of the world they created such as:

*Seremugah ke ngaga tanah/ Seremugah created the land*  
*Seregundi ke ngaga ai/ Seregundi created the water*  
*Seregundit ke ngaga langit/ Seregundit created the sky*

The Iban believe that the major gods live in the sky such as Lang Sengalang Burung and his kinsfolk. In the sky too is where the “raised world” of Panggau Libau and Gelong is situated, the abode of the mythical heroes and heroines, whom are also believed to be spirits as well. These gods and spirits are usually summoned to the festival of the Iban such as *Gawai Antu*, *Gawai Timang Amat* and et cetera. The spiritual and mythical heroes and heroines of the Panggau Libau and Gelong are believed to possess all the attributes to which all Iban aspire. There are several myths that depict them as courageous warriors and skilful weavers and they possess magic by which they may kill or enliven.

Oral traditions relate that these spiritual heroes and heroines are irresistibly handsome and strikingly beautiful. People from other cultures of the world may not believe this, but for the Iban, they are undeniably real and their patronage is sought in all undertakings. Some myths recount that in the beginning, the Iban lived as co-residents of communities with these spiritual heroes, but due to a series of unnatural calamities, led his followers from the earth to “the raised world” called Panggau Libau and Gelong. Vinson and Sutlive (2001b)<sup>13</sup> mention some examples of these calamities such as mysterious deaths from sharp needles, violent behaviour of some heroes, appearances of great piles of dung and several attacks by freshwater tortoises and garfish.

The myths also recount the origins of fundamental features of the Iban society and culture, for example the gift of *adat* as a way of ordering behaviour, rules for living in longhouses, avoidance of incest, marriage rules, burial rites, care for the soul of the dead, farming, augury, festivals, treatment of illnesses, warfare for men and weaving for women (Sather, 1994)<sup>1</sup>. According to some popular myths in the oral traditions of the Iban society, below the earth or beyond the sea, there is the Otherworld of the Dead called *Sebayan*. *Sebayan* is also the home of dieties such as Raja Niram and Dara Rambai Garuda. It is a popular belief that these dieties lead spirits of the Iban ancestors back to the longhouses or communities of their descendants when they are summoned for the festival of *Gawai Antu* (“Festival of the Dead”).

Of all the products of the Iban culture, folklore is one of the most distinctive. It is created in times past and present and it is generally a commentary on the Iban world. Thus it is subjected to interpretations by the Iban contemporaries because it includes all lore, that is, the learned and transmitted wisdom, knowledge and patterned behaviours (Vinson and Sutlive, 2001a)<sup>3</sup>. The Iban folklore also includes the numerous genealogies.

It is noted that the relationship between the Iban and their oral literature has been reciprocal. This means that the literature has been produced from the experiences and perceptions of the Iban society which are encoded in the various literary forms. Nevertheless, this oral literature has had a constraining and constitutive effect. This effect influences the process of inferring meaning from the text (exegesis) and reading meaning in the texts. As a result, the literature focus on community attention and education which challenge the Iban elders to review, analyse, dramatize and defend their cultural heritage. Rather, assuming the role of the educators to their children, they are prompted to unite and defend their beliefs and personal integration in their culture.

For example, the Ibans defend their traditional fictive narrative called *ensera* described as epic sagas. This epic or saga is sung in poetic language with explanations and conversations in prose. Most of the *ensera* also tells about the mythical heroes and heroines of Panggau Libau and Gelong, among whom are *Keling*, *Kumang*, *Laja*, *Lulong*, *Tutong*, *Bunga Nuing*, *Pungga*, *Pandak Segatak* and the like (Richard, 1981)<sup>14</sup>.

*Ensera* can also be any tale told partly in poetic form as opposed to simple prose tale (story or *jerita*). *Ensera* is in fact an entertaining play concerning the people of Panggau Libau and Gelong. Listening to *ensera* has been one of the Iban pastimes both for young children and adults. The more skilful the story-teller, the more he is able to elaborate on the exploits of both portals and the *petara* (dieties) who lives in “the raised world” (Panggau Libau and Gelong), the legendary place of dieties.

The secular literature includes fables, riddles, proverbs, aphorisms, sayings and metaphors. Fables in the Iban oral literature are stories with references to superhuman persons or they may be just stories in personification of animals are chosen as characters. Fables are important because they are used to teach moral lesson.

As something common in the Iban oral traditions or literature, the Iban fables also include aetiological tales like “why the lobsters walks backwards”, “why the gibbon has no tail” and et cetera. Vinson and Sutlive (2001a)<sup>3</sup> note that the favourite animal characters in Iban fables are the mousedeer, tortoise and the tiger. Although smaller in size, the mousedeer and tortoise usually survive and thrive by their wits, outsmarting the big animals like tiger, elephant or even rhinoceros, as told in the fable *Jelu Nubai*.

Didactic in nature, the Iban fables are rich in sources for aphorisms and proverbial statements that educate the Ibans with lessons of honesty and integrity. For example, the discourse *mit kelikit, besai kelikai* from the fable *Jelu Nubai* is an indictment that “the small should receive little” and “the large should receive much”.

In the Iban oral literature, aphorisms are often known by *sempama* or *jaku sempama*. They come in the forms of parables, metaphors or proverbs. According to Vinson and Sutlive (2001b)<sup>4</sup>, parables are a favourite form of Iban oral traditions. They are meaningfully used to moralise the folly of characters. Sometimes the Iban used metaphors and similes generously to give colour and emphasis to their everyday speech. For example, the love songs (and even invocatory chants) are liberally laced with metaphors. It is interesting to note that the Ibans are capable of making metaphorical statements, an example of the highly developed and much valued language arts. The proverbs, metaphors and aphorisms are created and transmitted to instruct or educate the hearers. The structure of each proverb is similar, consisting of couplets that reinforce the theme of the statement.

*Entelah* (riddles) have been a favourite tradition among the Iban. To disentangle the riddles, it requires keen wit and active imagination. It is not easy to unravel the words that hide the answer. Whoever poses the riddles will have to provide *ulu lungga*, that is, a clue which the Iban call “handle”. Sometimes to find the answer to the riddles can be so difficult that even with the help of the “handle” (clue) or *ulu lungga*, riddles often present challenges to even the most intuitive minds.

## **The Importance of Oral Literature to The Iban Society**

People can perceive the soul of a culture through its oral literature. Likewise, it is through the oral traditions that one can see the soul of the Iban culture. Most importantly, it is in this oral literature that the cosmology of Iban society is revealed (Vinson and Sutlive, 2001b)<sup>4</sup>. Vinson and Sutlive asserts that the Iban oral literature is vast and incredibly beautiful. Although it is very fragile, the Iban oral literature however remains in the memory of the elder generation who are rapidly dying out. It is considered to be fragile because it does not survive under conditions of modernization and education. Nevertheless, it is through such oral literature that the Iban society can maintain its roots to the past as well as its dignity.

Today, there is indeed an urgent need for immediate action to recover the dying oral literature because there is a sharp decline in the numbers of ritual specialists and the erosion of ritual speech. Nowadays, it is not possible to find interpretations for all the metaphors and words in the oral literature that have been collected.

There is another reason why the oral literature is significant to the Iban society. It is critical for anthropological study because it provides information about the traditional Iban life. The oral traditions in fact shows their life conditions in ancient times when they lived in relatively isolated farming communities but they had the time to let their creativity expand and reveal or reflect the nature of their lives, their sorrows and joys, and their relationship through songs and chants, folklore, myths and legends, fables, stories and epics as well as riddles and sayings.

It is significant to note that the Iban oral literature is complex and also equal in aesthetic development to any of the great literatures of the world (Vinson and Sutlive, 2001b)<sup>4</sup>. As it is, their oral traditions or literature also contribute to the vast and accumulating universal knowledge of cultural knowledge and traditions.

Therefore all members of the Iban society must treasure their oral literature and keep it safe for them to appreciate and enjoy. This explains why the role of Tun Jugah Foundation is critical to record as much as possible the Iban oral literature and translate these traditions before it is too late or dying out, swallowed by the era of modernization in the Iban society itself. The Tun Jugah Foundation is doing its work well in collecting, preserving and translating this important cultural treasure.

Iban oral literature is very important if it perceived in the context of their folklore. This is because the Iban folklore incorporates proto-historical and historical events and persons. It is said to be encyclopedic (Sather, 1994)<sup>1</sup> and it is a wonder to witness how the guardians of oral traditions reciting the texts stored in their memory while the listeners are motionless and intent as they follow every word that is spoken. To the Iban, these words from the oral traditions bring the

past back to life, because they are venerable words that they provide the key to the storehouse of wisdom of their ancestors in the past.

In those pre-modern days, the Ibans communicate their hidden feelings and aspirations to each other through traditional poetry which is rich with hidden meanings and coded messages. Thus, the Iban poetry becomes a social media or channel for interaction and transmission of messages, ideas, feelings, love, friendship, behaviours, attitudes, emotions and thoughts one person to another. But basically, the poetry is used to entertain friends and guests during their festive occasions or leisure times with the spirit of playfulness. If it is a poetry of encouragement, the singer communicate numerous words of encouragement to the particular public figure whom he has directed his melodious poem. Iban traditional poems are still popular and they are recited or sung during social gatherings and functions in Iban communities but the on-going onslaught from modern forms of entertainment is fast causing this traditional form of entertainment to die out.

## Conclusion

The Iban are fortunate to possess an extraordinarily rich literature, says Otto Steinmayer (1999)<sup>15</sup>. He adds that the Iban literature is remarkable for its variety and high quality. In the past, all this literature was oral, that is, it existed through the voice and performance, yet it survived and thrived in the memories of the people. However, in the past thirty years much of this oral literature has been written down, and the Iban writers have begun to use modern forms such as novel short stories.

Regarding the traditional forms, the Iban use both prose and verse. In prose there are many stories that deal with everything from the gods and heroes to daily life and ordinary people. There are serious stories and funny stories, and poetry is remarkably well-developed. Iban is a language in which many thousands of rhymes are possible, and Iban poets use rhyme to create stanzas that are tightly woven and highly musical with metrical complexities (Steinmayer, 1999)<sup>15</sup>.

Today, much of the Iban oral literature has been recorded in print and ready to be enjoyed by the modern silent reader and it undeniably offers endless treasures to those who love poetry. The Iban literary language is undoubtedly very difficult because nowadays there are fewer people who are still at ease with the literary and ritual language. Moreover there are not many Iban scholars who can edit and comment on the epics and *leka main* (traditional poetry) of their ancestors. The meanings of many words of poetry are recorded only in the memories of the Iban singers and *lemambang* (ritual bards).



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