

Moussons

Recherche en sciences humaines sur l'Asie du Sud-Est

29 | 2017

Le commerce du sexe en Asie du Sud-Est. Approches pluridisciplinaires

Oral Literature, Heritage and Ritual Performances in Borneo: A Review of Two Recent Publications

Antonio J. Guerreiro



Electronic version

URL: <http://moussons.revues.org/3864>

ISSN: 2262-8363

Publisher

Presses Universitaires de Provence

Printed version

Date of publication: 4 May 2017

Number of pages: 303-311

ISBN: 979-10-320-0110-3

ISSN: 1620-3224

Electronic reference

Antonio J. Guerreiro, « Oral Literature, Heritage and Ritual Performances in Borneo: A Review of Two Recent Publications », *Moussons* [Online], 29 | 2017, Online since 04 May 2017, connection on 04 May 2017. URL : <http://moussons.revues.org/3864>



Les contenus de la revue *Moussons* sont mis à disposition selon les termes de la Licence Creative Commons Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation Commerciale - Pas de Modification 4.0 International.

Oral Literature, Heritage and Ritual Performances in Borneo

A Review of Two Recent Publications

Antonio J. Guerreiro

Anthropologist and museographer, ICOM France member

Monica Janowski, *Tuked Rini, the Cosmic Traveller. Life and Legend in the Heart of Borneo*, Copenhagen: Nias Press/Kuching the Sarawak Museum (Nordic Institute of Asian Studies Monograph Series no. 125), 2014, index, glossary, map, many illustrations, VIII + 174 p.

Isabel Herrmans, *Rituals Retellings. Luangan Healing Performances through Practice*, New York/Oxford: Berghahn, 2015, (“Espistemologies of healing”, vol. 16), map, glossary, index, illustrations, 294 p.

The renewed interest in heritage studies during the last decade has produced wealth of important books on the tangible, monumental and natural heritage in Borneo. One must add exhibition catalogues and various publications about Museum collections. While studies about the intangible heritage of Borneo indigenous peoples are much less numerous.¹ The disappearance of these unique creations of Bornean societies increases tremendously as more minor languages are becoming extinct and that ceremonial practices such as dances, songs, epics, tales and invocations are being lost. The great diversity on the island with ten main linguistic groupings should be stressed: it comprises many dialectal variations from the coastal areas to the center of the island, among “Malayic” and “Dayak” languages. “Smaller” languages may have only one thousand to two thousands

speakers or sometime less (Adelaar 1995, 2005; Hudson 1992). Many of these smaller speech communities are now endangered.

The two books considered in this review, one focusing on a Sarawak upland people, the Kelabit of the Highlands, located in the upper Baram area, and the other about the Luangan of the interior of Southeast Kalimantan, bring a refreshing approach to the topic. Clearly, the books are the results of long term field-research and personal commitment for the people by the authors. Both works do contextualize oral literature and related practices in connection to the heritage, natural environment and social background of each area. Although the authors developed specific methodologies in their approaches, they map out basic questions engaging core cultural values in both societies. Their works point also at the challenges and conditions of transmission under two different administrative systems, respectively in East Malaysia and Indonesia. The future of this intangible heritage is at stake when the pervasive influence of national languages, *Bahasa Malaysia* and *Bahasa Indonesia*, television, the impact of digitalization by using mobile phones (smartphones) and computers, is now felt even in the most remote regions.

As the subtitle indicates, Janowski's book forms an introduction to the way of life and the cosmology of the Kelabit people through the prism of Toked Rini's legend or rather "epic". The Kelabit culture hero was a great war leader, its name (*toked*) meaning literally "support" of the people. The oral text of the epic (*sekono*) combines narrative parts told by a storyteller and poetic parts (*sedarir*) inspired by the characters—the whole text is currently available on a web site.² The epic was first recited to Monica Janowski by the late Balan Pebala in 1986 in Pa' Dalih during her initial field work (1986-1988). However, many Kelabit from the community joined in the transcription, interpretation and translation of the oral text. Although Janowski does not elaborate on the transcription of the text, or its peculiar features (rhyme, prosody, intonation, speed) and gender distinctions compared to other Kelabit oral genres, she chooses a convincing personal narrative in her rendering of the epic. It formed a truly collaborative effort to document and conserve this important oral heritage of the Kelabit people. Further data were collected by the author during intensive field work in the 1990s and during visits in the framework of the "Cultured Rainforest Project", which featured an exhibition and publications (Janowski 2012, 2013). During a period of about 30 years Janowski developed her knowledge of the Kelabit by documenting their culture and heritage. The Kelabit language belongs to the Apad Duad (Apo Duat) group, within a wider Northern Central Borneo cluster. They are over 8,000 Kelabit in Sarawak, many live now in the towns, such as Miri and Kuching.

The all-pervasive Kelabit concept of *lalud*, at the same time "cosmic/spiritual power" and "life force", is explained in general terms from ethnographical examples (26, 97-101). It links the material and the spiritual realms, defining the life of the people in the highlands from time immemorial, it applies also to the *sedarir* parts of the epic which have a special power when recited by Kelabit individuals. Features of the landscape, such as caves, waterfalls, megalithic monuments which are spatial markers and other topographical features, are connected to the epic

(14-21). It's worth mentioning that a location map, including the contour lines, presents the main research area: it forms a triangle of roughly 10 km x 6 km x 6 km between the communities of Pa' Mada, Ramudu and Pa' Dalih/Batu Patong abandoned longhouse. The setting of Toked Rini's tale being truly in "the heart of the Borneo". The Kelabit's cosmology distinguished three main interconnected levels: upper world (skies), underworlds (including Puruk Tanah Liang) and *tanah* earth inhabited by human beings. In the book, the Kelabit cultural themes defined by Janowski are combined with the story of Toked Rini (social patterns and kinship, longhouse living, cooking and meals, wet rice cultivation, salt-making, hunting and fishing, *irau* feasts, etc.). Indeed, as she remarks, the social life of the Kelabit has retained its core components until the present time. Boxes in the book address also other topics connected with heritage: a summary of Janowski's Museum collecting, for the British Museum and Sarawak Museum (11-12), Kelabit *pesaka* heirlooms, such as beads, Chinese ceramic jars and gongs (32-33).

The structure of the book, organized in four main sections, defines the cultural history and heritage of the Kelabit people in connection to the epic: 1. Before the legend; 2. The Legend of Toked Rini; 3. Understanding the Legend; 4. The Language of the Legend (and Kelabit-English glossary).

The epic of Toked Rini exposes the world view and cosmology of the pre-Christian Kelabit with truculence and fascinating detail, down to the relations between animals, landscape and spirits. The core of the tale can be summarized as follows: the Hero accompanied by his cousin Balang Katu travels in the cosmos up to the highest sky, Langit Temabong. There he fights against powerful enemies, the people of the Tiger's rock, hence a connection to head-taking (66-67), while his wife, Aruring Menepo Boong, concentrates on rice cultivation. After their victory against the enemies, Toked Rini and the people of Luun Atar longhouse celebrate their victory by *irau* feasting. The main value of the book lays in the transcribed and translated sections of the *sedarir* text which was traditionally chanted by the bards embedded with *lalud* spiritual power, e.g. 42-43, 61-62, set between the narrative parts of the legend (see 94 for contextualization). According to Janowski, these sung *sedarir* parts would be learned by heart. Until the 1950s, the drinking of rice beer (*borak*) was part of the celebrations and it added to the merriment in feasts and social meetings when such stories were recited.

In a way, the book can be considered as a companion volume to Janowski's previous publication, *The Forest: Source of Life* (2003), focusing on the interactions between the natural environment, the longhouse community and the material culture of the Kelabit—jointly published by the British Museum and the Sarawak Museum in relation to the collections she made for those institutions.

Clearly, the metaphorical characters of Toked Rini and his wife from the Luun Atar community have a paradigmatic role: they stand for Kelabit cultural values and identity. In this respect, a table of the characters featured in the tale is most useful in following the developments of the tale (22). A glossary (151-155) and an index (171-174) add also to the book. Many ethnographical precisions are provided

by the author in the end-notes (162-170, I remark that an errata is provided for the missing cross-references in the notes).

A strong point of the book should be mentioned: the many photographs, the ethnographer's and her husband's colour images, Sarawak Museum B/W photo archives, besides drawings and patterns of Kelabit artifacts by Claire Thorne and field work sketches. Stephen Baya iconic paintings relating to the Kelabit world view and aesthetics add a personal touch to the book. The layout of the book makes it a pleasant read, the story is thrilling and it is at the same time a discovery of the people and landscapes. In short, this work which is half-way between an academic and a popular book addresses a larger audience. Janowski intelligently uses the sources on Kelabit language and culture in a synthetic way. The diffusion of the book in Sarawak should be a success as well as a model for future publications. The author can be credited for bringing together the different aspects of Kelabit culture and heritage, including the adoption of Christianity, and the continuities in the social life of the highlands. It makes accessible to the lay reader the fundamentals of oral tradition and literature through the epic, including the variations and themes in different recorded versions (90-95). Then, it can be hoped that the book would foster its transmission as a "living heritage".

A long awaited book, Isabell Herrmans' *Ritual Retellings*, a revised version of her doctoral dissertation (2011), is an elegantly written ethnography. The research for this monograph was carried out with her fieldwork partner, Kenneth Sillander over a long period of time. As the author recognizes, they collaborated on previous publications (Sillander 1995, 2004, 2005). The present book nicely complements these works and integrates as well a couple of her articles on "Luangan healing performances in practice", following the subtitle of the book. The research took place between 1993 and 2011, in the border area of East and Central Kalimantan among the central Luangan, with visits to communities in the Mahakam, the Bentian, Benua' and the Taboyan areas. The focus of Herrmans' research was the *belian* rituals which form the core of the religious and social life of the Luangan, indeed they link various dimensions of cosmology and myth in the belief system. She studied as well community rituals, such as those of the *nalin taun* category, and other minor rites. In the course of fieldwork the author developed an intimate relationship with the ritual specialists and knowledgeable persons, both men and women, she had access to various oral sources as well as an unpublished ms. of a Luangan scholar, Lemanius about their history and mythology.

The Luangan form a loosely integrated grouping of related ethnolinguistic units, about 120,000 persons, scattered over three provinces, East, South and Central Kalimantan. Traditionally they lived in longhouses but during the last decade many have moved to separate family housing. They are mostly swidden agriculturists of hill paddy. The author defines the Luangan ethnic identity as non-inclusive. The ethnonym Luangan (formerly Lawangan), perhaps derived from the Luang River name, refers to one segment of this ethnic constellation and is used also as a generic ethnonym for the whole grouping (compare Weinstock

1983). According to Hudson, they all speak dialects of the Northeast division of the Barito language family, at the exception of the Tunjung (autonym Tonyooi) on the middle lower Mahakam, who have adopted the Luangan rituals and beliefs but not their everyday language. In short, the Luangan do share common origins and a religious tradition that set them apart from their neighbours. Their “point of origin”, an ancestral place conceptualized in mythological sense, is affirmed in the upper Teweh River, over the watershed in central Kalimantan. Near the centre of the wider Luangan settlement area, the Gunung Lumut mountain area in Pasir, where the souls of the dead are supposed to travel and gather, forms another mytho-geographical marker—see situation map on p. 31. During a two-month survey to the area in 1992, Herrmans was impressed by the frequency of the *belian* shamanistic performances and related rituals such as the multi-family *buntang*—thanksgiving and curing—among the central Luangan, hence her useful comparisons between these related peoples (Bentian, Taboyan, Benua’).

The book is organized in six balanced chapters, besides the introduction (1-23) and a shorter conclusion (254-263). The chapters consider “Luangan life” and identity (25-70); “Representing Unpredictability” (71-90); “Making Tactile”, about the use of *ganti diri* figures in healing ritual (91-124); the “Uncertainty of Spirit Negotiations” (125-176); “Ritual Bathing as Depersonalization” (177-216); “Re-enacting the Mythology and the Human Spirit relationship in Ritual” (217-254).

Writing about “Emergence and Tradition” (14-18), Herrmans proposes a working definition of performance theory applied to ritual in line with the approaches of many scholars, from Dell Hymes to Turner.³ However, she goes to expand it into “practice theory” relating to ritual action and aims. For Herrmans, this approach posits that “studying *belian* as practice involves those cultural forms, social relations, and historical processes that move people to act in ways that produce those effects” (after Ortner 1989). More generally, she notes that *belian* would be akin to an *habitus* for the Luangan, according to Bourdieu’s well known notion (Bourdieu 1980). In practice “tradition” is also a process in which some key elements are defined and redefined in terms of negotiation. A definition that applies nicely to the role of *belian* rituals in Luangan society. These strategies are used by actors in in different contexts as to limit uncertainty or perhaps anxiety too. She provides a detailed chronology of the interactions taking place during twenty-five days of *belian* and *buntang* (“Negotiating with spirits”, 129-149). Herrmans’ exploratory perspective shows how the *belian* ritual traditions, and the related body of oral texts, are continuously produced and reproduced in the framework of negotiations between the spirit world and the humans. It may also take the form of a “routine”, based on the reassuring reiteration of certain gestures and speech acts, performed by the actors, both shamans and patients, as the subjects of an ongoing narrative. Clearly, she opted for a situational ethnography, exploring the “spaces” rather than the “fields” of Luangan cognitive experience, based on ritual acts and language. She does quote fragments of oral texts in the book, *belian* invocation (96-99), song (184-189), mythical narrative (240-241, 242-243), transcribed and

nicely translated into English with a flowing quality. The glosses adding a finer touch to the description of ritual practices.

Following an interpretative approach, the author starts her inquiries from her Luangan friends' statements and practices about the world in which they live. The perception of the Luangan's healing rituals are rooted in their mythological background. Herrmans considers the ritual tradition from the standpoint of the *belian* repertoire, with its many variations in style, detail and designations according their origins (*belian bawe, b. bawo, b. sentiu, b. luangan, b. dewa-dewa...*). It would take too much space to go into the details of these in this review. In short, the ritual repertoire would form the core of the Luangan's identity, *adat* and "relatedness" to their natural and spiritual environment, including ancestors' spirits and deities (45-50).

But what actually constitute Luangan's shamanism?

Belian rituals are open ended rather than self contained, and display a reiterative rather than linear structure [...] Rather they involve doing the same or similar thing over and over again during the same evening, and over several subsequent evenings, and in the process they adjust to changing circumstances arising from inside and outside the ritual (51).

As Herrmans remarks, the *belian* healing performances are structured by a ritual sequence, of which the main elements are: 1. The calling of the spirit familiars; 2. The presentation of offerings and respects; 3. The purchase of the patient's soul; 4. Soul searching; 5. The treatment of the patients, and 6. The presentation of rewards to spirit familiars (52). The rituals specialists—*belian, pemelian, pemiliatn* among the Benua', and *wara* officiants of death rituals—have the knowledge and authority in *belian* rituals, on a par with the *adat* leadership, and at the same time, they are the guardians of oral traditions. The rituals are constructed on a dichotomy of life and death, a feature which permeates also Luangan myths. Interestingly, the *nalin taun* community celebration, connected to the cycle of swidden cultivation, was adapted by the central Luangan from the Benua'. Herrmans reports the case of a *ngaraya* ritual—promise of a *nalin taut* to the *seniang* spirits in charge of natural cycles—at the initiative of a customary chief, *kepala adat* (217-220, 233-234, 236-240).

The attention ported to ethnographical detail in the rituals described, and the insertion of important oral texts, paint a convincing picture of Luangan sociality and healing practices. This is first detailed monograph that addresses the interactions between the *belian* rituals, cosmology and mythical origins as embedded in the *tempuun* narratives.⁴ The epistemological reading of the *belian* interactive performances proposed by the author adds a dynamic perspective to our knowledge of Luangan shamanism. Although Herrmans does not goes as far as considering *belian* rituals as an aesthetic activity, despite the considerable investment in time and resources by the Luangan in ceremonial structures (*balei, blai, juus*), shamanic dances, music, paraphernalia (*penyelenteng*) and offerings, including buffalo sacrifice in *buntang*. This aspect, besides the focus the performances provide in less

integrated communities, is maybe connected to their exceptional vitality among the Bentian, the Benua' and the central Luangan in contrast to their neighbours?

A word about the editing of the book, the only drawback being the small type used in the end-notes and bibliography, making it slightly difficult to read. On the other hand, the twenty B/W context photographs are nicely printed. The glossary (264-270) provides most of the key terms relating to *belian*, spirit notions and ritual activity among the Luangan. A useful index of personal names, general notions and place names, complete the book.

Taken together these books fill a gap in our knowledge of oral traditions and ritual performances in Borneo. In their own way, they contribute to the conservation of endangered languages and cultural practices. The songs, epics and chanted invocations, the mythical narratives, are interacting with the social life of the people (celebrations, feasts and healing practices). This intangible cultural heritage should be recorded as much as possible, because the elders, proponents of *adat* traditions, shamans and bards, are disappearing fast. Although the actual situation of these peoples differs: the more wealthy and educated Kelabit demonstrate a strong ethnic identity, they have a low population concentrated in one region, while the less affluent Luangan are formed of various ethnic segments spread out over a wide area. Clearly they do not face the same challenges in the conservation of their heritage. Actually in Kalimantan there seems to be less concern for such activities. These efforts should stimulate new projects of collaboration, involving the local communities. Conversely, the publication of vernacular texts in both English and *Bahasa* translations, would be the next step, as well the development of more websites and databases,⁵ to make sure that this important heritage, giving meaning and identity to the people, does not fade out completely. To conclude I warmly recommend these works to the student of oral traditions and heritage, especially to those who have an interest in ethnographical methodologies and collaborative approaches.

Notes

1. See Appleton (2010), Césard, Guerreiro & Soriente (2015), Ding Ngo (1984), Langub (2001), Morgan (1996).
2. The work of transcription and translation is presently continuing (<http://tuked-rini-online.niaspress.dk>).
3. For an introduction to the topic, see Turner (1987) and Phelan (1993).
4. The only publication on this topic, a collection of Benua'-Tunjung myths, was translated in *Bahasa Indonesia* and English in two separate volumes: Hopes, Madrah & Karakng (1997a/b).
5. An urgent task which can be carried out under the aegis of a Foundation, an University or perhaps the Borneo Research Council (Phillips, Maine) a non-profit organization, in collaboration with Dayak NGOs and associations.

References

- ADELAAR, Alexander K., 1995, "Borneo as a Cross-Roads in Austronesian Linguistics", in *The Austronesians. Historical and comparative perspectives*, Peter Bellwood, James J. Fox & Darell Tryon, ed., Canberra: Australian National University, pp. 75-95
- ADELAAR, Alexander K., 2005 "The Austronesian Languages of South East Asia and Madagascar: A Historical Perspective", in *The Austronesian languages of South East Asia and Madagascar*, A. K. Adelaar & N. P. Himmelman, ed., London: Routledge, pp. 1-42
- APPELTON, Ann, 2010, *Speak Melanau Mukah. An English–Melanau Mukah Word Phrase List*, Kota Samarahan: Universiti Malaysia Sarawak.
- BOURDIEU, Pierre, 1980, *The Logic of Practice*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- CÉSARD, Nicolas, Antonio GUERREIRO, Antonia dan SORIENTE, 2015, *Petualangan Unjung dan Mbui Kuvong. Sastra Lisan dan Kamus Punan Tuvu' dari Kalimantan*, Jakarta: EFEO/Gramedia (KPG).
- DING NGO, A. J., LII' LONG, 1984, *Syair Lawe'. Pahlawan demi kekasih*, Yogyakarta: Gadjah Mada University Press., 5 volumes.
- HOPES, Michael, Dalmasius T. MADRAH & KARAAKNG, 1997a, *Tempuutn. Mitos Dayak Benuaq & Tunjung*, Jakarta: Puspa Swara dan Rio Tinto Foundation.
- HOPES, Michael, Dalmasius T. MADRAH & KARAAKNG, 1997b, *Tempuutn. Myths of the Benuaq & Tunjung Dayak*, Jakarta: Puspa Swara dan Rio Tinto Foundation.
- HUDSON, Alfred B., 1992, "Linguistic Relations among Bornean Peoples with Special Reference to Sarawak: An Interim Report", in *Shifting Patterns of Language use in Borneo*, Peter W. Martin, ed., papers from Second Biennial International Conference, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia, Williamsburg: Borneo Research Council Proceedings Series 3, pp. 1-40.
- JANOWSKI, Monica, 2003, *The Forest Source of Life: The Kelabit of Sarawak*, London/Kuching: The British Museum and the Sarawak Museum.
- JANOWSKI, Monica & H. BARTON, 2012, "Reading Human Activity in the Landscape: Stone and Thunderstones in the Kelabit Highlands, Sarawak", *Indonesia and the Malay World*, 40, 118: 354-371.
- JANOWSKI, Monica, H. BARTON & S. JONES, 2013, "Culturing the Rainforest: The Kelabit Highlands of Sarawak", in *The Social Life of Forests*, S. Hecht, K. D. Morrison & C. Padoch, Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- MORGAN, Stephanie, 1996, *Kamus Kenyah Lepo' Bakung-Indonesia*, Samarinda: Seri Penerbitan Kalimantan Resource Centre (KRC). Pusat Kebudayaan dan Alam Kalimantan WWF.
- PHELAN, Peggy, 1993, *Unmarked. The Politics of Performance*, New York: Routledge.
- SILLANDER, Kenneth, 1995, "Local Identity and Regional Variation: Notes on the Lack of Significance of Ethnicity among the Bentian and the Luangan", *Borneo Research Bulletin*, 26: 69-95.

- SILLANDER, Kenneth, 2004, *Acting Authoritatively: How Authority is Expressed Among the Bentian of Indonesian Borneo*, Helsinki: University of Helsinki Press.
- SILLANDER, Kenneth, 2006, "Local Integration and Costal Connections in Interior Kalimantan: The Case of the Nalin Taun Ritual of the Bentian", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 37: 315-334.
- SORIENTE, Antonia, 2006, *Mancalèny & Usung Bayung Marang. A collection of Kenyah stories in the Óma Lóngh and Lebu' Kulit languages*, Jakarta: Atma Jaya University Press.
- LANGUB, Jayl, 2001, *Sukět: Penan Folk Stories*, Samarahan Universiti Malaysia Sarawak: The Institute of Asian Studies.
- SOUTHWELL, Charles H., 1990, *A Kayan-English Dictionary*, Kuching: The Sarawak Literary Society (2nd edition).
- TURNER, Victor, 1987, *The Anthropology of Performance*, New York: PAJ Publications.
- WEINSTOCK, Joseph, A., 1983, "Kaharingan and the Luangan Dayaks: Religion and Identity in Central-East Borneo", Ph.D Thesis Cornell University.

