Publications on Borneo from Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, 2001-2002

Bernard Sellato
from outside to search for the sick person's soul (p. 138).

Chapter Seven explores the stylistic dimensions of the chants and the multiple facets of the meanings conveyed by the “deep” language in which they are partially composed, an archaic and cryptic ritual speech that sometimes even ritual experts cannot make sense of – hence the difficulty of the task that the author has fulfilled in translating them. To sum up, Sather makes a convincing case for the centrality of words in Iban shamanic rituals and for their priority over non-verbal acts.

Finally, let us ponder the equation contained in the book’s title: “Seeds of Play” equals “Words of Power.” As mentioned above, the sung words are known as the “seeds of the pelian” (leka pelian), or “seeds of play” (leka main). As indicated in the preface of the book, leka literally means “seed” or “gist of”, and main, “play”, “doing”, so leka main can be translated as, literally, the “gist” or “seeds of the performance” (p. xiii). This term, Sather adds in the following sentence, “suggests [that] words are taken to be a major source of the shaman's power.” Subsequently, however, he does not translate leka pelian literally, simply stating in the introduction that, taken together, the two words refer to “ritual poetry, either sung or spoken” (p. 1). In the glossary appended at the end of the book, we learn that leka is also a numerical classifier (p. 724), and this raises the question: In the phrase leka pelian, is the word leka to be taken in a metaphorical sense that already implies the idea of the ritual efficacy of the chants, or is it used as a classifier, therefore standing for “word” without any specific connotation? Or both? In the absence of any explicit indication of “deep” language being involved here, one may ask whether these words, the “power” of which is so eloquently described, are really “seeds of play” – or what it means.

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By Bernard SELLATO

The Institute of East Asian Studies (IEAS) was created at the Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) in 1998 with Professor Michael Leigh as its inaugural Director. Michael Leigh is a long-time scholar of Sarawak. His earlier publications include: The Chinese Community of Sarawak: a Study of Communal Relations (1964), The Rising Moon: Political Change in Sarawak (1974), and Council Negri Sarawak, Malaysia's Oldest Legislature (1992). It was after a long career in Australia (University of Sydney) and peninsular Malaysia (Penang) that he took up the challenge of starting IEAS at the then newly-founded UNIMAS in Sarawak.

Within IEAS, the Dayak Studies Program, chaired by Professor Clifford Sather, was inaugurated in January 2001, at the initiative of and sustained by a generous endowment from the Dayak Cultural Foundation, with the aim to promote long-term research on issues confronting the Dayak communities of Sarawak and, more generally, of the island of Borneo. Later, at the end of 2002, Professor Abdul Halim Ali was appointed to the Chair of Nusantara Studies at IEAS. He is undertaking a major research project on the coastal Malay communities.

Clifford Sather has published extensively on the Bajau Laut and on the Iban, including his recent Seeds of Play, Words of Power: an ethnographic study of Iban shamanic chants (2001, see the review by P. Couderc, above), and has edited Origins, Ancestry and Alliance (with James Fox, 1996; see Moussons 99: 121-125). The Dayak Studies Program initiated two publication series, an Oral Literature Series and a Contemporary Society Series. The former saw four volumes published, the latter, one.

Dayak Studies, Oral Literature Series
King Siliman and other Bidayuh folktales. Raja Siliman pas tingah tanun Bidayuh da bukon, compiled by Robert Sulis Ridu, Ritikos Jitab, and Jonas Noeb, OLS No. 1, 2001, 138 p.; Suket: Penan folk stories. Suket Penan, compiled by Jayl Langub, OLS No. 2, 2001, 198 p.; Apai Alui becomes a shaman and other Iban comic folktales. Apai Alui nyadi manang enggau ensera Iban bukai, compiled by Clifford Sather, OLS No. 3, 2001, 181 p. With the introduction of television, National Language schooling, urban migration, and other changes, the once rich corpus of Dayak oral literature is rapidly disappearing and, where it still survives, it is rapidly changing, either being radically reshaped or assuming new cultural roles and meanings. Each book includes a brief, but useful introduction by the volume’s editor or compiler, ten selected folk
stories of, respectively, the Bidayuh (among whom they are called dondan), the Penan (suket), and the Iban (ensera), narrated by traditional storytellers, presented in English and in the original vernacular (edited), and illustrated with lively drawings. This endeavor to salvage oral literature and re-disseminate it (or re-inseminate it?) through the written medium should help strengthen or revive ethnocultural identities among Sarawak's Dayak. At the same time, it nicely adds to our knowledge of Borneo's genres of vernacular literature.

The old Kayan religion and the Bungan religious reform, by Lake' Baling, translated and annotated by Jérôme Rousseau, OLS No. 4, 2002, 124 p. Contrasting with the three earlier titles above, this book is based on a written composition. Lake' Baling, a prominent traditional leader of the Kayan, “a clear thinker and a good communicator,” was also literate, and he wrote this unique book in the 1950s. Shortly before his death in 1976, he asked Professor Jérôme Rousseau to translate it into English. This book presents a brief introduction by Rousseau and both the original Kayan text and Rousseau's translation cum annotations (almost 200 footnotes). It describes the old Kayan religion, Adat Dipui, and the religious reform of the 1950s, Adat Bungan – both now on the wane due to massive conversion to world religions – and is complemented by a short glossary. While this book is an important one for the Kayan themselves, it is also a valuable companion document to Rousseau's 1998 Kayan Religion (see Moussons 99: 130-131).

Dayak Studies, Contemporary Society Series
Changing borders and identities in the Kelabit highlands. Anthropological reflections on growing up in a Kelabit village near the international border, by Poline Bala, CSS No. 1, 2002, 142 p. The Kelabit are one of Sarawak's most isolated peoples, yet they count among their younger generations a number of university graduates and, interestingly, several social scientists. In the late 1970s, Robert Lian Saging examined Kelabit ethnology, and Yahya Talla wrote one of the most important ethnographic studies ever on his own people. Several other young Kelabit followed suit. More recently, Poline Bala, having completed her M.A. thesis at Cornell University (1999), chose to produce an intimate account of the changing life of her people and, at the same time, to focus on a major contemporary question throughout Southeast Asia: the existence of international borders cutting across ethnic groups' territories, the multiple meanings of the notion of boundaries, and the role these play in creating and mediating identities. This is definitely an interesting contribution to the study of hinterland borders. Its author is now pursuing further studies in anthropology at Cambridge University.

A further purpose of the Dayak Studies Program was to create a permanent sound archive, maintained in co-operation by the Majlis Adat Istiadat, the Tun Jugah Foundation, the Dayak Cultural Foundation, and IEAS, to preserve original recordings of Dayak oral literature, including oral history, biography, and life-history narratives.

Worthy of notice is another IEAS publication, in the Nusantara Studies Series: Life in the Malay kampongs of Kuching, fifty years ago, by A. Zainal Abidin and Abdullah Salleh, 2002, 87 p. In 1953, two young students of the Department of Geography at the University of Malaya captured a picture of the daily life of the Malay community in Kuching. Not much has ever been written on the subject of Sarawak Malays – apart from Tom Harrisson's much critiqued 1970 study. Although, unfortunately, the original photographs are missing, this is a rare document, abundantly illustrated with maps, sketches, charts, and tables. One of the authors later became an ambassador, the other the president of the national petroleum company.

Rounds’ work, covering a set of related ethnic groups straddling the borders of three nations (see above), and Baer’s thematic reference list. The latest, and probably the last output of IEAS, as it was, is Michael Leigh’s large book (H 42.5 cm, W 30.5 cm): *Mapping the Peoples of Sarawak*, 2002, 123 p. The book opens with a classification of the ethnic groups of Sarawak, followed by brief demographic information. It then displays some seventy A3-size, full-color maps showing the pattern of settlement as it existed in 1968, before the massive changes that began in the 1970s – with the commercial opening of the rural forests and lands of Sarawak – and have continued throughout into this century. Some forty pages then display tables listing settlements, names of headmen, population, and ethnic affiliation. An original supplement to these tables is the author’s forthcoming set of overlays showing the ownership of all businesses, from large timber companies down to the smallest village shop. The 1970 population census is included at the end of the book. This book thus provides critical baseline documentation for the analysis of subsequent social, economic, and demographic transformations – its maps constitute a useful background to transparent overlaid sheets carrying more recent data or other types of data, from language use to land use patterns. It also demonstrates the usefulness of GIS technology in social science research.

Early in 2003, Michael Leigh’s employment contract was renewed for only one year, and for that year he was not reappointed Institute Director, which precipitated his resignation. Although Clifford Sather’s reappointment was approved by the Dayak Studies committee, it was blocked by the Federal Public Service Commission, similarly bringing about his resignation. Let this brief review of IEAS’ recent publications draw attention to these two prominent senior Borneologists’ achievements and constitute a tribute of recognition to their long-standing dedication to Borneo studies.

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By Antonio Guerreiro

This atlas of Timor Lorosa’e was released in May 2002, coinciding with the new East Timorese nation’s proclamation of independence (20 May). The author, Frédéric Durand, a lecturer in Geography at Toulouse-Le Mirail II University and a specialist of forestry issues in Southeast Asia, has been able to enlist the collaboration of many scholars, NGO staff, and the people of Timor Lorosa’e in order to produce this reference work, at the same time a useful tool for the new nation’s development. The book was jointly published by two French institutions, in Paris and Bangkok, and supported by the research team LAEMA of CNRS. The book presents the island’s geography and colonial history, notions about its ethnolinguistic groups, general sociological data, and field photographs, in an approach well suited to grasp the complex issues that have developed in Timor, especially over the last sixty years, following the trauma of the Japanese occupation in the Second World War (1942-1945) and Indonesian annexation of East Timor (1975-1999). Timor, the largest island of the Lesser Sunda island arc, is also important for its population of over two million people.2 The choice by the author of the ethnic name of the land in the Tetum language – *Timor Lorosa’e* or *Lorosa’e*, “Timor Sun Rising” – is commendable, as it stresses the transition from the Portuguese colonial era (*Timor*) and Indonesia’s forced integration (*Timor Timur*) to the new state of East Timor. However, the Portuguese rendering of its name, *Timor Leste*, linked to the people’s struggle for independence during the last twenty-five years, is still in use and quoted in the Indonesian press. Since the publication of Robert Cribb’s *Historical Atlas of Indonesia* (2000), this is the most comprehensive cartographic treatment available about the island of Timor, in no way redundant.