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BETTER LATE THAN NEVER: SARAWAK'S ORAL TRADITION PROJECT, 1991-1992**Sanib Said****INTRODUCTION**

In the midst of the joyous 25th Anniversary Celebration, there were cries, heard by a small number of people who loved our cultures, lamenting the fast disappearing living encyclopedia of Sarawak's cultures. The cries felt on the sensitive ears of the government and in October 1990 an Oral History Project was officially launched. The task was to be carried out by the Majlis Pembangunan Sosial (Social Development Council). I have labeled the two year project as the "race against time, space and ethnicity". It was going to be a very tough and difficult marathon. But the government believed we have to start somewhere, sometime and it began in 1991.

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In theory I was reluctant to make a strict division between oral tradition and oral history. As a historian studying the ancient and recent pasts I found it is almost impossible to separate the two. To me both are basically historical sources and information that need to be selected, analysed and interpreted. History is not simply the study of some significant events as a result of human actions and decision but should also encompasses past human societies — how societies functioned, and organised. As such it includes what are normally the essence of oral traditions such as poems, rituals, prayers, idioms, narrative, epics, animal stories, myths, legends, songs, dances and the same goes for the so-called oral history. These are sources and information for the study of history. The literary people may rewrite and improve them to become literary works. The law makers may use them to draw legal documents. Hence oral traditions and histories are largely sources and information for many disciplines concerning the past.

A more appropriate term and which has been used for this paper is oral literature. This is how I like to see our programmes in Sarawak going to adhere to in the course of our recording memories of the past.

PAST ACTIVITIES

Interest in collecting oral literature came with the coming of the British colonialist led by James Brooke who later became the so-called raja of Sarawak in 1842. In their journals which were later published, show the importance

of oral literature for the colonialist to understand Sarawak and its various ethnic groups. However none of these books contain any extensive texts. Later when the Brooke government published its official magazine *Sarawak Gazette*, in 1870, some interested officers in various stations contributed some translated oral materials. An outstanding contributor was one officer Perham who sent an Iban folklore in 1881, 1886 and 1887. In early 1900's it was Howell and Bailey who took up this vocation, also on the Iban oral materials.

In the middle of the 1950's right up to through out the 1960's more vigorous attempts were made to collect oral literature. The main objective of this period was simply to publish them for inserting local content of reading materials in the schools. The Borneo Literature Bureau (BLB) which was responsible in the task at that time published about 49 titles before it merged with Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, the federal agency. It was a commendable effort but unfortunately the recordings were not meant for preservation while the published work had been abridged and edited making them almost unreliable for serious studies.²

Besides the BLB, there was a man who continued to collect and study oral literature through the 1970's. This admirable man was Benedict Sandin, who later became the Curator of Sarawak Museum. For three decades Sandin collected and published oral literature which culminated in the publication of his first major work in 1967, *The Sea Dayaks of Borneo Before White Rajah Rule*.³ In all he had about 39 works published. If the recordings have been preserved and catalogued we would not have to worry, if not then its a great misfortune.⁴

An earlier Curator of the Sarawak Museum, Tom Harrisson, too, some time labelled as a jack-of-all-trades, collected oral literature as well. I suspected he made numerous recordings among the Malays and the Kelabits but they were not known to have been preserved.⁵

Another government agency, Majlis Adat Istiadat, formed in the middle of 1970s is also involved in oral literature. Unlike the other previous agencies, its main objective is to draw up the Dayak customary laws base on the various oral literature. In the last five years it has enormous recordings; Iban, about 300 cassettes; Bidayuh, about 100 cassettes; and Orang Ulu, about 270 cassettes.⁶ Again bibliographical control and preservation were not given priority but with Jayl Langub around things would be different.

In 1982 the Ministry of Youth, Sports and Culture organised an oral tradition workshop but nothing definite was achieved.

Following the 1988 symposium, Jugah Foundation, the main sponsor of the Iban cultural seminar, began its oral tradition programme and has successfully collected 60 hours of recording.