



The Sarawak Museum Journal

Vol. XL No. 61

December 1989



ISSN: 0375-3050

E-ISSN: 3036-0188

Citation: Dris, A. (1989). Oral Tradition a Discussion on Some Areas of Melanau Oral Tradition. The Sarawak Museum Journal, XL (61): 339-356

ORAL TRADITION A DISCUSSION ON SOME AREAS OF MELANAU ORAL TRADITION

Aloysius Dris

INTRODUCTION

The state of the art in the Melanau oral tradition is very much on the brink of sunset and in some cases are already quite far into the dusk. As a whole, the Melanau oral tradition is definitely fast disappearing. This may appear to be a pessimistic and somber remark for an introduction but it is true.

Apart from a few valuable records in various forms and of diverse interest/discipline on the Melanau we have very scanty records of any aspect of Melanau oral tradition. The only consolation, perhaps, is that we can always start from whatever records that we have presently and from there we can explore further on what is left in oral form within the community. Recording process, as we know, is not an easy task. It needs skill, patience and multi-disciplinary approach for the record to be meaningful, comprehensive and accurate or, at least, as close as possible to the original practices.

Past works on records are valuable pointers to assist us in our effort. We must, therefore, not look at the weaknesses or at what is lacking in these records but try to improve on them as these records are made for limited objective. Positively, therefore, let us through discussions and discourse learn from whatever sources that we have to re-construct and preserve oral tradition in as accurate form as possible.

A regional seminar on oral tradition was organised in November 1973 as a UNESCO project on the study of Malay culture (Malay culture in the wider context of the word 'Malay') with the objective of focussing on the research on oral tradition in Malay culture area and to survey the activities undertaken by the member countries ie. Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand and others.

ORAL TRADITION

A Discussion On Some Areas of Melanau Oral Tradition

by

Aloysius Dris

INTRODUCTION

The state of the art in the Melanau oral tradition is very much on the brink of sunset and in some cases are already quite far into the dusk. As a whole, the Melanau oral tradition is definitely fast disappearing. This may appear to be a pessimistic and somber remark for an introduction but it is true.

Apart from a few valuable records in various forms and of diverse interest/discipline on the Melanau we have very scanty records of any aspect of Melanau oral tradition. The only consolation, perhaps, is that we can always start from whatever records that we have presently and from there we can explore further on what is left in oral form within the community. Recording process, as we know, is not an easy task. It needs skill, patience and multi-disciplinary approach for the record to be meaningful, comprehensive and accurate or, at least, as close as possible to the original practices.

Past works on records are valuable pointers to assist us in our effort. We must, therefore, not look at the weaknesses or at what is lacking in these records but try to improve on them as these records are made for limited objective. Positively, therefore, let us through discussions and discourse learn from whatever sources that we have to re-construct and preserve oral tradition in as accurate form as possible.

A regional seminar on oral tradition was organised in November 1973 as a UNESCO project on the study of Malay culture (Malay culture in the wider context of the word 'Malay') with the objective of focussing on the research on oral tradition in Malay culture area and to survey the activities undertaken by the member countries ie. Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand and others.

Since that seminar, very little has actually been done as far as study on Melanau culture is concerned apart from isolated works by individuals in their attempts to place on record certain aspects of oral tradition and 'folklore' for specific purpose or objectives.

DEFINITION

Professor Mohd. Taib Osman defines oral tradition as those expressions of a culture which exist and are transmitted in time and space by means of oral communication. This definition covers the whole gamut of tradition and culture. According to him, most of the items of oral traditions are also subsumed under the labels of 'folklore', of 'folklife' and 'traditional culture'. Thus 'oral traditions' would include such cultural items as mythology, legends, folktales, proverbs, riddles, chants, spells, songs, dances, games and amusements, beliefs and customs.¹

Professor James Danandjaja of Indonesia in his paper on *Folklore Research in Indonesia - A Preliminary Survey* presented at the Regional Seminar on Oral Tradition in Kuching in November 1973, broadly classifies oral tradition to include the following:—

1. Folk Speeches, such as dialects, nicknames, allusions, secret language, taboo language, etc.
2. Proverbs and proverbial phrases.
3. Riddles.
4. Folk poetry like *pantun*, *bidal*, *syair*, etc.
5. Prose narratives, such as myths, legends and folktales (including jokes).
6. Folkmusic (vocal and instrumental).

Speaking of the influences of oral tradition on the Malay culture which is also largely true of the traditional Melanau, Professor Mohd. Taib said:

"The oral traditions have been the mainstay in supporting the social life of these peoples. In societies like those of the Javanese or of the coastal Malays where writing has existed since the dawn of their civilisation, a great segment of these peoples went about their everyday lives without the benefit of the written word. Other societies, especially those in the interior, never knew any writing system until late in the twentieth century."²

On the importance of the role of oral tradition when there is a need to identify certain items especially in cultural expressions which are able to inculcate a sense of cultural belonging, Professor Taib believes that oral traditions can be used as a feedback to society, either in their original forms or transformed into new idioms, but still retaining their indigenous essence.

TRADITIONAL VIEW OF ENVIRONMENT

It is considered pertinent at this point to give some insight into the view of the traditional Melanau of his environment as described by Dr. H.S. Morris in the following paragraph:

A Melanau's view of this environment differed in a number of ways from that of a European. To him the universe was made up of a number of worlds, of which this one, the middle world, between the sky and the underworlds, was the proper place