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## ORIGIN OF THE IBAN COMIC HERO APAI ALOI: A SARIBAS SAGA VERSION

Clifford Sather

(National University of Singapore)

To an Iban of traditional upbringing there is probably no imaginary character more familiar than the comic hero Tambap or Apai Alo. The present paper records a long Saribas saga, or *ensera*, concerned with the origin of Tambap and the events of his early life before he married and became the familiar Apai Alo of Iban children's fables<sup>1</sup>.

The later exploits of Apai Alo, his wife and children are the subject of a great body of Iban cautionary tales, told to youngsters by their elders, generally at bed time (Sandin 1960, 1965a, 1965b, 1965c, 1965d, 1965e, 1967a; Sather 1978). These tales contrast with the sagas of the equally mythologized Orang Panggau, the heroes and heroines of the Gellong and Panggau Libau spiritual worlds. To the Iban, the Orang Panggau, particularly Keling and Kumang, represent personifications of the ego-ideals of manly courage, resourcefulness, and womanly beauty. By contrast, Apai Alo is a negative chastisement, the fool who forever suffers rebuke and disaster as a result of his own misdeeds, stupidity and greed. He represents a negative ideal of how not to behave. His relations with his wife, Indai Alo, parody conjugal ideals. He is hen-pecked and cuckolded; he cheats his family of food and causes them to go destitute (Sandin 1960, 1965c). His relations with his friend, Apai Sumang-Umang, similarly make mockery of friendship, as the two continually seek to take advantage of each other (cf. Sandin 1965a, 1965d). In all these tales Apai Alo is ultimately the loser. In everyday speech, the terms *aloi*, *salo*, *sali-ali*, or *apaloi* are used to describe a foolish or silly person, who, through avarice or lack of wit, brings about his own undoing.

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### A Saribas Saga Version

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Apai Aloi, for all his foolishness, is nonetheless an ambivalent figure. The ambivalence associated with his character is neatly expressed in Tambap's origin as recorded here, as partly human, partly demonic. Moreover, his human nature is of heroic proportions. In this story, Tambap's foolishness is overshadowed by his extraordinary cunning. Juxtaposition with the heroes of Gellong is signified by the location of his house, downriver from Gellong, yet within the same spiritual realm, and by his involvement, depicted here and in other saga, with the Orang Panggau. In concluding this saga, the story-teller takes note of this ambivalence by observing that, while Tambap is an important person (*pengawa*), a hero, his conduct is very different from that of other Iban heroes.

The present saga is partially an etiological tale. It is concerned essentially with Tambap's personal origin. It also accounts for his stupidity and irrational fear of the *ngingit* beetle. This latter fear appears as a humorous element in many fables in which Indai Aloi mimics the beetle's call to terrorize her husband, much as parents use the nightly calls of insects and animals to frighten

small children into obedience. In one story, for example, Apai Aloï secretly roasts a wild boar in the forest in order to avoid sharing it with his family. Guessing his intention, Indai Aloï conceals herself closeby and frightens her husband by mimicking the *ngingit*, causing him in an effort to quiet the insect, to throw the roasted meat, piece by piece, to where she and her children are hidden, until at last he flees in terror when all of the meat is gone (Sandin 1960: 639–40). In recounting Apai Aloï tales, the story-teller generally gives the hero a peculiar nasal voice (*idol*), which, in oral presentation, gives an additional comic aspect to his character. The origin of this peculiarity is also described. But in addition, the present *ensera* is very largely an account of Tambap's journey to the home of his father. The journey theme is a recurrent one in Iban culture, both in mythology and actual life. The present saga resembles in this respect major Iban etiological myths, such, for example, as those concerned with the origin of incest rules, of rice and the knowledge of augury (Sandin, in press). Similarly the invocation of gods and spirits is frequently expressed in journeys and counter-journeys and in actual life there exists the counterpart in past migration and in the travels of men in search of wealth (*pigi* or *bejalai*) or to places of special sacred association to acquire spiritual guidance (*nampok*). The journey described here is Tambap's travels to and from the realm of the demonic spirits in the course of which he gains riches, magical charms and the accoutrements of a traditional warrior.

Apai Aloï stories are told to children, particularly by grandparents, who often act in Iban families as caretakers of younger, pre-adolescent children, especially if the mother has a still younger child to look after or the parents are away at their fields. Part of the ambivalence associated with Apai Aloï's character derives from the nature of these stories as children's fables. Although it is not so evident in this saga, in most Apai Aloï fables Jung's analysis of the "Trickster" figure in American Indian mythology (1956) might equally well be applied to Apai Aloï, particularly his view of such a figure as a personification of unreason and subconscious impulse, in opposition to the "enculturated" individual, restrained by rationality and internalized social and moral norms. The opposition is expressed in the Iban *ensera* tradition by the contrast of Apai Aloï with the hero-ideals of Keling and the other Orang Panggau. The ambivalence of Apai Aloï's character reflects, I would argue, the similarly ambivalent status of children themselves, to whom these stories are addressed, who are likewise seen by the Iban as having only imperfect mastery over their impulses. Moreover, Apai Aloï suffers for his irrationality and lack of restraint. Thus, though basically comic stories, often hilariously so, most Apai Aloï fables have also a moral, or heuristic element. In the end, it is the hero who brings humiliation upon himself for his amorality and base self-seeking is essentially self-destructive.

The present *ensera* was recorded from Lemambang Luat anak Jabu\* of Sepuna longhouse, Ulu Paku, Saribas. On the morning of June 6th, 1978, Mr. Benedict Sandin and I travelled to Sepuna longhouse in order to discuss with Lemambang Luat questions relating to the use of farming charms for

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\* Lemambang Luat anak Jabu passed away on 25.4.1980 at the age of 96. His vigils were attended by mourners from Sungai Pelandok to the headwaters of the Paku and by guests from the Krian and Rimbas. His passing marks the loss of one of the revered Paku bards in living memory.