



The Sarawak Museum Journal

Vol. XLII No. 63

December 1991



ISSN: 0375-3050

E-ISSN: 3036-0188

Citation: Carol Rubenstein. (1991). The Flying Silver Message Stick: Update 1985-86 on Long Songs Collected 1971-74. The Sarawak Museum Journal, XLII (63): 61-164

THE FLYING SILVER MESSAGE STICK: UPDATE 1985-86 ON LONG SONGS COLLECTED 1971-74

Carol Rubenstein

BACKGROUND TO THE UPDATE PROJECT

On 31 May 1985 I returned to Sarawak after an absence of nine years with a project sponsored by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts in Translation (USA). This was related to my earlier work of collecting, translating and documenting songs, chants, song cycles and epics of seven groups of Sarawak Dayaks, sponsored by the Ford Foundation in cooperation with the Sarawak Museum. None of the material had previously been written down in any language. The project began in August 1971 and ended three years later in September 1974. Eight months of my proof reading followed, and then the results of the project, containing the songs in the indigenous languages and the English language translation were published by the Sarawak Museum in spring 1975 (Rubenstein 1973, so dated for sequence only). Subsequent visits to Sarawak followed in 1975 and 1976. Collections of only the shorter songs and chants within the Dayak life cycle were also published (Rubenstein 1985, 1990a).

During 1985-86 for the eight months of my stay I revisited earlier sites to update my data concerning the state of the songs and in particular to meet again with the singers of the long song cycles and epics which I had earlier collected and translated while working with the Sarawak Museum and its excellent staff, along with other informants and interpreters. I also visited additional sites briefly (some Kajang groups) and stayed for one month near Penan Uru groups, collecting and translating Penan songs (Rubenstein 1990e). Unlike the logistics of my earlier research, during 1985-86 I traveled on my own and found my own assistants.

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The three main areas for collecting the long song cycles and epics during the 1971-74 project had been Iban, Bidayuh and Kelabit. For the Iban, the Renong Song Cycle for Entertainment (*Renong Main*) was from the Paku-Saribas region, Sri Aman Division (formerly Second). For the Bidayuh, the Brayun Song Cycle (*Brayun*) and the Hero Songs (*Ayun Ngayu*) were from the Serian district,

Kota Samarahan Division (formerly First). For the Kelabit, the three epics - Songs of Balang Lipang (*Sedadai Balang Lipang*), Adi, Song of Agan (*Adi*) and Song of Tukad Rini (*Sadadir Tukad Rini*)— were from the Bario region, Miri Division (formerly Fourth).

At the time of my recent research I also inquired into the possibility of helping to develop a Kuching-based Dayak oral literature research center, to train local researchers to collect and translate their own oral literature. This met with interest at all the rural sites and in some quarters of the government. Extensive correspondence followed then and during 1987 and 1988. Outside funding was possibly forthcoming; but conflicted support within Sarawak defeated the project in its then form. Perhaps some oral literature may yet be salvaged, as noted previously by Chin (1980) as being a valuable endeavor.

THE TRANSLATION PROCESS

The process of collecting, transcribing, translating, typing and checking was slow and arduous for me and for the informants and interpreters. I could have done little without the extended assistance of the Sarawak Museum.

With regard to the singers, I had originally collected basic data; but for my update project these were extended to document the following: 1) Approximate age of singers; 2) when they learned the long songs; 3) how they had been instructed; 4) whether they had changed anything in their own singing of the songs; 5) to whom they had in turn passed on the songs, if at all; 6) their own responses to the songs, and that of their audiences; 7) on what occasions the songs were performed, past and present; and 8) their views on the place of the song in their society, past and present.

For the original project (as for the recent Penan project), the song was first recorded and transcribed in the indigenous language. Working with one or more interpreters, I learned the meanings of each word and phrase, which often changed depending on the context. Putting together the meanings to form a viable sequence, as much as possible related to each line, was the next step. The information at that stage was validated as best as I could ascertain. I then produced an equivalent version of the poem, incorporating both the line-by-line meanings and the intent, style, emotion and nuance of the original. I found that once the key expressions and phrases were established, they were frequently repeated and also that they were often varied in subtle ways. But only by querying each word and phrase within the expanding context of the song as its multiple meanings developed could I begin to comprehend the song.

It is understood and respected among literary translators that there are two main avenues into the poem's unknown entity — working alone, with one's own knowledge of the language; or working with another, utilizing the informant-interpreter's knowledge of that language and associated culture. Also, that there