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A SURVEY OF THE ORAL TRADITIONS OF SARAWAK

Allen R. Maxwell

INTRODUCTION

The traditions and values of preindustrial peoples are largely passed down from one generation to the next orally. Oral traditions are thus an extremely important source of information for any understanding of a people and their culture. The oral traditions of traditional peoples are closely connected to their concept of "home". The idea of "home" includes the region in which people live and work. This area is that portion of the natural environment in which they carry out most of their activities and know intimately, and is an important one to any people. The oral traditions of the peoples of Sarawak are anchored in a spiritual as well as a physical environment. It is from the combination of these two types of environments that a notion of belonging to a place and an area probably develops. Over time people become accustomed to being in their home place. This, of course, is not to say that groups do not move, they certainly do and have been doing so for thousands of years. But it does take time for people to become used to a new place, and time for their attachments to the spiritual and physical environment to develop.

In the *Sarawak Gazette* I suggested that it is in the oral traditional texts of a group of people that much of the culture and traditions of that group is inscribed and preserved for posterity (Maxwell 1987a).¹ It is one particular genre of texts, the ethnohistorical epic texts, that are most important as the "containers" in which so much of traditional culture is to be found. Among some other groups which do not utilize the epic, it is prose texts which appear to play this role. Thus if knowledge of these vehicles for the transmission of oral traditions were to disappear before the texts were recorded, a great deal of traditional culture would be lost forever.

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EPIC TEXTS AND ETHNOHISTORY

There are in Sarawak, I believe, two types of orally transmitted materials which are crucial to gaining an understanding of the ethnohistory of any given group. These are epic historical texts and genealogies.² Epic texts are the most difficult ones to study because of their great length, the most easily lost because of the demands made on human skill and memory, and, I would argue, the most important type of text because of the massive amounts of cultural information which they contain.

The key concept in the understanding of an epic is that of the *oral epic song*, which Alfred Lord defined (1960: 4) as

... narrative poetry composed in a manner evolved over many generations of singers of tales, who did not know how to write; it consists of the building of metrical lines and half lines by means of formulas and formulaic expressions and of the building of songs by the means of themes.

The main characteristics of Sarawak's oral epics can be summarized as follows.

(1) An epic is oral song transmitted to an audience from the singer's memory. (2) An epic is commonly in poetic language. (3) An epic may be in ordinary language (e.g., the Kayan *Tawang*) or in a special literary language (e.g., the Kayan *Belawan*). (4) An epic is often recited, chanted, or sung in a special metrical style. (5) Epic texts are typically quite long, ranging from 8,000 to 20,000 lines, and perhaps longer. (6) Epics generally contain a great deal of historical and ethnohistorical information.

In addition to preserving their cultural traditions, epics preserve the ethnohistorical traditions of a group of people. Sarawak's ethnohistorical are particularly rich, but are not widely known, except to a small group of specialists and, of course, members of the groups which possess the particular traditions. Ethnohistorical texts preserve the historical knowledge and traditions which peoples have of their own past and where they have lived. These texts often contain considerable information on the place of origin of a group, and events and episodes which relate to the life and times of their earliest beginnings. They often trace out in poetic form the historical development of the group, and sometimes even bring the sequence of events up to present times. Perhaps more importantly, they contain the system of traditional values which are often expressed in the conceptualizations which the group has about its own past. In order to understand the thinking of a people in contemporary times, knowledge of their traditional values as expressed in their thinking about the past, can be crucial to any understanding of how they interpret what is happening in the modern world.

In a paper on the Kadayan of Brunei, I used the term *ethnohistory* to designate the knowledge and understanding that they have about their own past, and the functions of this type of diachronic information in their culture (Maxwell 1987b).³ This study of Kadayan ethnohistory relies primarily on knowledge and information transmitted from one generation to the next by word of mouth. In other words, it is based primarily on oral traditions (Mal. *tradisi lisan*) rather than written sources. Written materials are very important for any ethnohistorical study, but they do not constitute the primary sources of information, which derive from living memories. Written records can supplement and enrich our understanding of the oral materials, but it is the oral sources that constitute the primary sources of information for ethnohistorical study.

Ethnohistory can be distinguished from "history proper", or "professional history", as practiced by professional historians. In history, it is written documents, both published and unpublished, that constitute the primary sources of information. But just as ethnohistorians supplement their primary data with material derived from written sources, historians often expand and deepen the interpretations of written documents, with information derived from oral interviews. A highly successful example of