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### WHAT DO APAI ALUI AND *DEATH OF A LONGHOUSE* HAVE IN COMMON?

Patrick PS. Yeoh

#### ABSTRACT

This article, for the first time, looks at Sarawakian literature in English - both folktales translated into English from their original native language (Iban, Bidayuh or Penan) or folktales retold in English, as well as original writing in English by Sarawakians, including poems, anecdotes and short stories — as a loosely related body of work that provides a wealth of commentary on the socio-cultural landscape of a developing Sarawak over a period of a little more than half a century from the cessation of Sarawak to the British Crown by the third and last White Rajah, Charles Vyner Brooke in 1946 to the beginning of the new millennium. Specifically, it looks at the tales of Apai Alui, a popular native comic character and a contemporary short story, and identifies the similarities of the two genres from different generations in the way they both are socio-cultural commentaries. There is also an overview of all the works that are considered Sarawakian literature in English to show that this body of work is both substantial and significant and warrants greater attention and study.

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## INTRODUCTION

*A country's literature is a crystal ball into which its people may look to understand their past and their present, and to find some foretaste of their future.*

- Robertson Davies, Edinburgh, 1988

Local Sarawak literature in English, defined as literature in English, whether written originally in English or translated into

English from any of the many native languages like Iban, Bidayuh, Penan, Kenyah and Melanau, has apparently never been seen as significant or deserving of research and study by both the public and academia. It is assumed that this has been primarily because the various works – short stories, folk tales, anecdotes and poetry in English – are mainly disparate efforts, with many producing little individually, although the total volume of work is substantial. Even those with interests in Malaysian literature in English seem to have by-passed the efforts of Sarawakian writers and focused mainly on works produced by Peninsular Malaysians. The fact that there appears to be no existing collection of all the Sarawakian literature in English as a more or less homogeneous body of work in any of the country's libraries could also be another significant reason for these works to have been ignored or to go unnoticed.

However, Sarawakian literature in English, when looked at as a whole, is both substantial and significant. Included would be the translated and retold folktales of the Iban, Bidayuh, Penan, Kenyah and Melanau and the works written originally in English in the past half century or so after the cessation of Sarawak to the British Crown by Charles Vyner Brooke, the third and last White Rajah of Sarawak. In the sixties and seventies, the Borneo Literature Bureau (BLB) was set up to encourage the development of literature in the Borneo states of Sabah and Sarawak. Through its efforts, hundreds of short stories in English were written and published, with several of the best appearing in this very journal between the 60s and 70s when the BLB was still in existence. The bulk of these efforts was by individual Sarawakians and Sabahans, each with a story or two rather than collections.

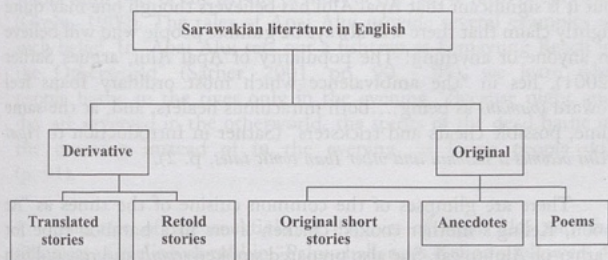
During the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and at the beginning of the new millennium, however, there have emerged a few Sarawakian writers who have individually produced anthologies of poems (Abang Yusuf Puteh, 1994, 1995; K. M. Wong, 1983, 1981) and significant collections of anecdotes (Ng. & Wee (Editors), 2004; Yong, 1997, 1998, 2000, 2003), original short stories (Ong, 2004) as well as translated and retold folktales (Donald, 1991; Galvin, 1971; Langub, 2001; Munan, 1998, 2005a, 2005b, 2006; Ridu *et*

al., 2001; Sather, 2001; Tersan, 2001) in English. Collectively, the works of these writers (and compilers), together with the many disparate efforts of other individuals, show that local Sarawakian literature in English is substantial and significant, with much to offer, both as literature in English and as socio-cultural commentary.

In looking at the total body of Sarawak literature in English as socio-cultural commentary, it is useful to draw a line between the folktales and the contemporary writing for reasons of chronology and related socio-cultural implications. The literature can be conveniently divided into two categories: 1) local folktales (whether translated into English or retold in English) and 2) contemporary original writing in English including poetry, short stories and anecdotes.

This paper makes a comparative study of Apai Alui, a popular folk character found in the translated folktales of the Iban, and *Death of a longhouse*, a contemporary short story written originally in English by Cecilia Ong (2004) and examines how each provides socio-cultural commentary.

Apai Alui is the much loved comic hero-trickster of local folklore. Tales of this comic character exist in the folklore of several native races of Sarawak, particularly in that of the Iban and also in Bidayuh and Penan folklore. Whether known as Apai Alui or by one



**Categories of Sarawakian literature in English**