

BOOK REVIEW

Clifford Sather. *A Borneo Healing Romance: Ritual Storytelling and the Sugi Sakit: A Saribas Iban Rite of Healing*. Kuching (Malaysia): Borneo Research Council, 2017.

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Dr. Clifford Sather is known for his ethnographic works on the Iban in Sarawak and the Bajau in Sabah. His *Seeds of Play, Words of Power* (2001) is a major work on Iban shamanic chants. The book under review here is about an Iban healing ritual called the Sugi Sakit. Such a ritual had died out about 28 years ago. In 2003, Dr. Sather was lucky to get Renang anak Jabing, an Iban priest bard, to perform the Sugi Sakit for a record. This is a labour of love that involves tedious work of recording, translating, analysing and writing. Only a very committed ethnographer would spend so much effort to finally produce this book of more than 500 pages, which contributes greatly to preserving a fascinating aspect of Iban cultural heritage. It is a product of cooperation between Dr. Sather and three other individuals who helped make this book possible, namely Dr. Sather's beloved wife Louise who helped him in recording, his assistant Mr. Jantan Uambat who is himself an Iban scholar interested in recording the ritual of his people, and of course Renang. For the author, the completion of the book is also very much in memory of Renang who passed away in 2007, and Louise who died of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) in 2016.

The book of 19 chapters is divided into four parts. Part One (four chapters) provides the background of the study, about the priest bards as healers, and the oral poetry with regards to the Sugi Sakit. The Sugi Sakit ritual involves telling the story of Sugi. It is about the adventures and love story of Bujang Sugi, the main spirit hero. The story tells of Iban culture

heroes and heroines who turned into spirits with the power to heal and help the living. In fact, “Bujang Sugi is none other than Keling” (p. 6), the popular Iban spirit hero who is known for his wandering and love affairs as well as his ability to heal and bring the dead back to life.

Part Two (two chapters) describes Sugu Sakit as a rite of healing. Chapter 5 is essential to following the overall description of the book as it outlines the stages of the ritual, beginning with the preparation before the ritual. On the day of the Sugi Sakit, invited guests are received, and with the arrival of the priest bard, the *meligai* stage is constructed for the patient. A *miring* (an offering ceremony) is performed, and by 6 p.m. the divining pig is ritually prepared, and, while the evening meal is served, the priest bard begins singing. He invokes the shaman gods who arrive from various mountain tops. By around midnight, the priest bard begins telling the story of Bujang Sugi. At dawn the next morning, the priest bard concludes the Sugi Sakit ritual, sending back the spirits, following which the pig is sacrificed. By 7 a.m., the pig’s liver is examined by the elders to reach a prognosis about the patient’s recovery. After a morning meal, the visitors return home, so does the priest bard after receiving his fee. At about 7.30 p.m., for the next three evenings, the patient is escorted to the *meligai* to spend the night there. Green leaves are hung at the patient’s *bilik* to warn visitors not to approach it. Such a practice of ritual prohibition is common among the Kenyah too, before they converted to Christianity.

Part Three, comprising 12 chapters, tells the story of Bujang Sugi. The fascinating story is transcribed in Iban verses with an English translation and in each chapter the author provides the cultural background, such as Iban courting and marriage proposals. Part Three begins with Chapter 7 about the longhouses of Father and Mother of Rimbu in disarray as they had no successor and there was a need to attract young warriors to help defend the community. Mother of Rimbu collected the love charms of Semanjan, the beauty of the longhouse although she was a widow. She released the power of the charms over the rooftop, thus setting the stage for the arrival of Sugi the hero (Chapter 8). He became the adopted son of Father and Mother of Rimbu, settling in their longhouse. There he courted Semanjan. Here, readers are given a detailed description of Iban courtship through the author’s description and the stanzas translated. In traditional Iban culture, a young Iban woman sleeps in the loft (*sadau*) and she is free to entertain male visitors in the evening, but there are rules to observe in this seemingly free traditional Iban courtship called *ngayap*. For example, if the woman lights her oil lamp and leaves it burning, this means that she wants the visitor to leave.

The initial encounters require the use of indirect speech, but when the couple is finally in love, the relationship can be very erotic:

The Visitor then paws her broad shoulder
And squeezes her young breasts
And, with that, Semanjan turns over on her back. (p. 234)

The constant courting in the longhouse had become a source of embarrassment and so Mother of Rimbu suggested that Sugi marry the lovely Sedinang of another longhouse, to which Sugi agreed. The verses in Chapter 10 thus provide a good ethnography of asking for a wife. As in traditional marriage proposal, the inquiry was initially made with poetic indirect speech:

And so, I come, friends, like a hornbill from the upper Kanyau that
flies directly to *kembayau* tree bearing ripe fruit

...

I have come, friends, to inspect the nesting place of a hornbill bird that
perches on top of *tapang* trees, standing side by side (p. 273–274)

...

I would like to set a noose trap in your country so that I might, perhaps,
trap a Bulwer's pheasant

When the father of Sedinang asked Father of Rimbu to unwrap his flowery speech, the latter said:

We have come here to ask Sedinang to become the wife of our beloved
son, Wat Bujang Sugi.

Sedinang was consulted and she gave her consent. The next morning, she accompanied Father and Mother of Rimbu to return to their longhouse, to prepare for the marriage (Chapter 11).

A traditional Iban marriage ceremony involves a blessing ceremony called *bebiau* and the ritual of splitting a betel nut (*melah pinang*). The former involves the couple sitting together while a male elder waves a cockerel and recites a prayer. The number of pieces of betel nut split determines how many nights after marriage the couple should visit the other set of parents. If there are five pieces, the couple is expected to begin this ceremonial visit (*nyundang pinang*) on the fifth day. But the marriage ceremony of Sugi and Sedinang was marked by the jealousy and rivalry between Semanjan and

Sedinang. This reflects the not uncommon troubles in marital relationship in real life: love, jealousy, rivalry, reconciliation and even divorce. The continuing love affair between Sugi and Semanja only made things worse, and Sedinang decided to return to her parents' longhouse. But Sugi regretted and chased after Sedinang. The journey through the jungle was marked by a virtual state of war, expressed in the dramatic contests of wit and magical power between the couple (Chapter 12). The appearance of Sedinang's former suitor complicated matters and invoked Sugi's jealousy. As they journeyed on, Sugi and Sedinang met enemies "more numerous than the *beluh* fish combined with *seluang* fish" (p. 325). The couple then showcased their concern and love for each other, and the story describes Sugi's bravery and manhood in protecting his wife. Having defeated the enemies and taken their heads, the couple completed their journey in time to pay their ceremonial visit to Sedinang's parents.

The next few chapters focuses on Sugi's heroism in fights and waging wars. In the longhouse, he accepted the challenge to a contest by Bachelor Iron Nail (Paku' Lawang) whose sweetheart Sugi had married (Chapter 13). Then Sugi travelled to the sky to rescue his parents-in-law who had been captured by Sugi's enemies (Chapter 14). Chapter 15 tells the story of Sugi leading his longhouse community to wage war on their enemies. Chapter 16 narrates about the victorious warriors returning home and readers are treated to an ethnography of head-hunting: the ceremonious reception of the newly-taken heads, the installation of the head trophies, and the organisation of a series of *gawai* to celebrate the victory and honouring Sengalang Burung, the god of warfare and augury. The chapter ends with Sugi inviting his guests to descend to the earthly world to treat the patient for whom the Sugi Sakit is performed. After the supernatural healing, the priest bard rubs the patient's body with curing charms (comprising the *kepayang* oil).

Chapter 17 resumes the story of Bujang Sugi. Early in the morning at around 6 a.m., the priest bard resumes singing to send home the characters in the Sugi story, including Bujang Sugi. A final sequel to the Sugi story is then sung. Afterwards, he sings to recall the souls including those of his spirit helpers. Finally, he recalls his own soul, and this marks the end of his role. Chapter 18 describes the conclusion of the Sugi Sakit, which involves sacrificing the pig and reading its liver for omens by the elders. Then, the priest bard is free to return home, bringing along an offering for his spirit helpers, which he casts away into the bush on his way home.

Part 4 (Chapter 19) concludes the study. The author provides a final analysis of the Sugi Sakit and its significance to the sick and the community. The patients for which the ritual is performed are usually very sick, in the final stages of their lives. Thus, the significance of the ritual is not just healing but also to bring together relatives and friends to show their love and support for the patient, and this makes a lot of sense. Of course, the belief in the unseen gods and spirits, in the magical power of Bujang Sugi and in the power of the poetic singing is psychologically important. It expresses the Iban view on ontology, which connects the seen with the unseen. “For the Iban,” the author writes, “the struggle to maintain life and recover, if only briefly, a feeling of physical well-being, is, above all, a struggle to be seen, to see, and remain visually aware of others” (p. 514). It is significant that the Sugi story is one of courage and subduing enemies as well as bringing about transformation for the better. Even love and beauty are relevant, for they are bound up “with our embodied experiences of what it is to be alive and actively engaged in the world” (p. 516). Thus, the author concludes that “the ritual worked to restore the visibility of the sick person, similarly using beauty, love, and compassion to recapture the gaze and nurturing attention of others, including, for the Iban, healing visitors coming as invited guests from beyond the human world” (p. 516).

While it takes quite an effort to follow the long story, the narration provides lots of information about Iban cultural world, such as the social and ritual significance of betel nuts as well as other plants and animals (such as hornbill). The narratives provide an ontology that connects the human and other beings in the physical and spiritual worlds. The mention of crocodile spirits as “protective” is fascinating to this reviewer as he finds the same is true among the Badeng Kenyah who regard the crocodile (also called *baya*) as *oko* or ancestors. While crocodiles occasionally kill people, various indigenous peoples, including the Lun Bawang, have crocodile spirits as their spirit guardians. In the Sugi epic, the hero is aided by crocodile goddess portrayed as his sweetheart (pp. 346–352). Some symbols by association are similar across cultures. For example, a cockerel is used in Iban blessing ritual (*bebiau*). Even the priest bard needs a blessing ritual after concluding the Sugi Sakit, by asking one of his hosts to wave him with a cockerel. The significance is associated with the cockerel’s ability to fly and crow, which can be used symbolically to send messages or cast things afar. In the Sugi Sakit, the cockerel is said to be able to carry away sickness (p. 471).

In Chinese Taoist ritual, a cockerel is used to lead a dead person's soul. In the Sugi Sakit, if the patient is about to die, he is quickly carried back from the *meligai* to his *bilik* (apartment), because if he dies outside the apartment, he would not be carried back to the *bilik*. The Chinese in Malaysia have a similar tradition, in which a person who dies outside the home cannot be brought inside the house.

As in many indigenous communities, dreams play an important role in omen reading and the connection between the seen and the unseen. In the Sugi story, Sugi tried to persuade his wife to postpone their trip to her parents' longhouse as he had foreboding inauspicious dreams about a cobra gliding over his body and later, he was attacked by a bear. The author mentions that dreams are taken seriously by the Iban and they are an important source of prognosis (p. 488). In the case of the three nights, the patient spends at the *meligai* after the Sugi Sakit; it is hoped that he will have dreams which give good omens.

The singing of the story of Sugi reveals many aspects of Iban social life including their interaction with non-Ibans, notably Chinese traders and Malays. In the final part of the Sugi story, Mother of Rimbu summoned a divining pig from the coastal area associated with Malays. It is interesting to note that the wooden feeding trough is filled with Malay trade goods such as brass bells and beads, and she addresses the pig "by a series of honorific Malay titles" (p. 429). Such an association of ethnic symbolism is also found in the Chinese worship of the Malaysian territorial deities called Nadugong, whom the Chinese perceive as having Malay identity, and so the offerings must conform to the halal rule, that is, no food items associated with pork can be offered. However, in the Iban case here, the coastal pig is associated with Malay ethnicity, and the author explains this in Chapter 16, footnote 25.

Overall, the author has done a good job in recording and translating the Sugi Sakit epic story. He gives due credit to all relevant researchers, in particular the late Benedict Sandin, the noted Iban ethnologist. The appendices and glossary are useful. However, if there is a list or a chart about the major characters in the story, it would be very helpful to readers. The appendix that provides a translation of verses about the main characters is not sufficiently helpful to easily follow the relationship between the characters.

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