

# GUIDE TO THE VARIETIES OF ORAL LITERATURE IN BORNEO<sup>1</sup>

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## INTRODUCTION

The societies of Borneo are changing so rapidly that we have now reached the stage of doing salvage ethnography. We can no longer observe cultural behavior uninfluenced by modernization. Thus, to understand how Bornean societies functioned prior to the loss of their traditional cultural ecology and prior to the loss of their religion that punctuated, symbolized, and sanctioned their traditional ways, the ethnographer has to rely only on accounts of individuals who are well into or past middle age and on their repertoire of various forms of oral heritage.

But this oral heritage is also rapidly eroding. With regard to many religious texts it is now difficult to find individuals who can provide a satisfactory exegesis of them and their ritual symbolism. In five to ten years most of this critical oral heritage will be lost. Yet much of the oral literature that accompanies religious performances is incredibly beautiful in terms of imagery, metaphor, and poetic construction so that they rank with some of the great literatures of the world.

As a result of this rapid loss of tradition, there has been an upsurge in interest in the recording of oral histories, oral accounts, and oral literature. To assist in the process of preserving this oral heritage, I thought it would be useful to provide a list of the types of oral heritage that one might encounter in attempting to make a collection of recordings. This is to serve as a guide to those individuals who have not had the time to become familiar with a particular cultural tradition to be aware of the forms of oral heritage that are found in that society. This guide is also to suggest what types of accounts would be profitable to record.

Much of the oral literature of Borneo was an integral part of religious performances in which various symbolic and ritual items and paraphernalia were included. These were presented to the gods and spirits in coordination with the performance and manipulated to punctuate it in order to secure help from the gods and spirits, or achieve success in sorcery and witchcraft. Therefore, I have included ritual behaviors in connection with this list of oral heritage as they are integral to the recording and full understanding of the oral literature.

This is a preliminary guide and I would welcome criticisms, suggestions, and additions to it as we attempt to preserve the oral heritage of Borneo before it is too late.

## Historical Accounts

- Migration accounts
- Warfare accounts, including information on what ethnic groups constituted the enemy and what ethnic groups were allies
- Accounts about the arrival of colonial governments
- Accounts of rebellions against the colonial governments
- Accounts of the Japanese occupation
- Accounts of natural disasters such as fires, floods, earthquakes, volcanos
- Accounts of natural events, such as eclipses of sun and moon.
- Accounts of descent lines of nobles, leading families, etc.
- Accounts of local history
- Accounts of family history
- Personal recollections

## Myths, Legends, and Folktales

- Stories explaining how the world became as it is, including the myriad etiological tales that explain the causes, origins, and reasons for behaviors of animals, people, crops, the natural world, illness, death, marriage, etc.
- Tales of success in warfare, journeys, and the accumulation of wealth
- Stories of culture heroes and how they contributed to the construction of the cultural and social world
- Morality tales
- Folktales dealing with economic and social change, as the introduction of a new crop and its consequences
- Stories about various animals
- Jokester stories

## Epic Narratives and Poetry

### Prayers, Chants, Songs, and Stories of the Work of the Gods

- Creation
- Members of the spirit world

- The structure of the otherworld
- The pantheon of gods
- Man's relationship to gods and spirits

### Prayers, Chants, Songs, and Rituals for Warfare and Headhunting<sup>2</sup>

- To enlist the help of the gods of warfare
- For obtaining invincibility in battle or a body that is impervious to wounding
- For weakening the opponent
- To seek omens and deal with unfavorable omens
- To send off the warriors and/or headhunters
- Songs and chants used during battles
- To welcome back the warriors and/or headhunters
- To honor the heads on arrival and periodically thereafter
- To honor dead heroes
- For building headhouses
- Tales of battles and village sacking

### Prayers and Chants Accompanying Changes in Life Cycle

- For fertility
- For pregnancy
- Birth
- Naming a child
- Disposal or treatment of the umbilical cord and placenta
- For cutting head hair and fingernails
- Circumcision, male and female
- Other genital procedures
- Adolescence
- Menarche

- To extend life span

(For marriage, children, and death see below)

#### Prayers, Chants, and Songs for Marriage

- For courtship
- For engagement
- For presentation of the bride-price
- To deal with unfavorable omens
- For wedding
- To deal with and nullify the effects of an incestuous union
- To nullify the effects of adultery

#### Prayers, Chants, and Songs for Children

- For naming
- To change name for protection from predatory spirits
- To induce sleep
- To protect from frightening dreams
- To calm upset child
- To amuse
- To quiet children so as not to anger spirits

#### Prayers, Chants, Songs, and Rituals for Death

- Construction of coffins
- For construction of graves
- For interment
- For construction of mausoleums, funerary houses, and funerary columns
- For primary and secondary treatment of corpse and bones
- Dirges
- Memorial ceremonies for honoring the dead

- For the sacrifice of slaves for the dead or the erection of funerary column
- For termination of mourning

#### Prayers, Chants, and Rituals for Body Ornamentation

- For Tattooing
- For ear lobe extension
- For teeth filing
- For penis pin insertion
- For scarification
- For cutting head hair

#### Prayers, Chants, and Rituals for the Soul

- Explanations of origin of souls
- Explanations of the cause of soul loss and its consequences
- Abodes of the soul before death and after death
- For souls that become ghosts or otherwise malignant

#### Prayers, Chants, Songs, and Rituals for Sickness and Healing<sup>3</sup>

- For bad dreams
- For sudden fainting
- To cast out ghosts
- For fevers
- For sharp stabbing pain
- For leprosy
- For tuberculosis
- For malaria
- For dysenteries
- For swellings

- For divine intercession for health and good fortune
- Illness accounts

#### Prayers, Chants, and Rituals for Minor Illnesses, Aches, and Pains

- Headaches
- Bruises
- Swollen and painful joints

#### Prayers, Chants and Rituals for Accidents

#### Prayers, Chants, and Songs for Divine Intercession

- To nullify effects of bad dreams and omens
- To nullify any transgressions against the gods or evil spirits
- To request good fortune
- To give thanks for divine intercession and good fortune
- For protection against spirits who are predisposed to harm humans

#### Prayers, Chants, and Rituals for Divination

- Divination by inspecting entrails of animal
- Divination by inspecting and feeling body of ill person
- For seeking omens
- For nullifying bad omens

#### Prayers, Chants, and Rituals for Fishing

- For fishing equipment
- For fishing boat
- To receive the fish
- For poisoning river pools for fish

### Prayers, Chants, and Rituals for Hunting and Trapping

- For blowpipes and spears
- To make hunting dogs chase game
- For traps
- To honor the animals killed

### Prayers, Chants, Songs, and Rituals for Gathering Forest Products

- For honey collecting
- For collecting gaharu and damar
- For collecting wild roots and tubers
- For collecting rattan

### Prayers, Chants, and Rituals for Fruit Trees

- For increasing the harvest of fruit
- To prevent stealing of fruit

### Prayers, Chants, Songs, and Rituals for Agriculture

- For the stars that indicate planting time
- For phases of the moon and aspect of lunar year for planting
- For elevation of the sun for planting
- To request dry weather
- To request rain
- For choosing a swidden site
- To cleanse the land
- To deal with unfavorable omens
- For establishing rights over the land
- To move local spirits away or to appease them
- For cutting the swidden
- For burning the swidden
- For the rice seeds

- For the whetstone
- For planting
- To call the rice spirits and/or ancestral spirits to swidden
- To honor the rice spirits and/or ancestral spirits by a sacrifice
- For increasing yields, renewing fertility, and keeping pests at bay, etc.
- For the first days of cutting the rice
- For eating the first rice of the new harvest
- To prepare for receiving the cut rice heads
- To make the harvest rice bin
- To cut the rice
- To thresh the rice
- To make rice wine
- To wash sacred or magical stones to make purifying, cooling, or fertilizing water
- Rituals and oral formulae for other crops such as maize, Job's tears, millet, sorghum, etc.
- For new cash crops

#### Prayers, Chants, Songs, and Rituals for Travel

- By sail boat
- By longboat
- By foot
- For engaging in a dangerous enterprise
- To ensure safe return
- For entering new country
- For approaching a settlement
- To welcome on return from a successful trip
- Tales of journeys



### Prayers, Chants, and Rituals for Obtaining Wealth

- To call the souls of jars, gongs, and other scarce goods
- To feed and honor the souls of property in the household
- For divine help in the accumulation of wealth

### Prayers, Chants, and Rituals for Manufactures

- Making a baby carrier
- Weaving
- Basket Making
- Making a rice mortar
- Boat manufacture
- Carving doors
- Carving figures
- Making coffins
- Carving wooden figures
- Carving and erecting memorial poles
- In erecting megaliths or making landscape sculptures

### Prayers, Chants, and Rituals for House Building

- For selecting a site for longhouse or house
- For dealing with unfavorable omens
- For erecting the central house or houses
- To bless entry ladder
- To rectify the ritual delict of failing to complete a house or longhouse apartment
- For moving from old house to a new house
- For human sacrifice to bless the house

### Prayers, Chants, and Rituals to Protect the Community

- From intrusion of foreigners or members from neighboring communities
- From spirit aggression

### Prayers, Chants, Songs, and Rituals to Renew Community Fertility

- Human sacrifice
- For community prosperity
- To mark boundaries of community land
- Festivals for the dead
- Other types of festivals and sacrifices

### Prayers, Chants, Songs, and Rituals for the Domestic Family

- Renewal ceremonies
- For fertility
- To ward off ill fortune
- For success in agriculture
- For success in purchasing gongs, jars, brassware, etc.
- For protection from illness
- To obtain divine blessings

### Trance Performances

- To obtain spirit familiars
- Conversations with the spirit familiars and other members of the spirit world
- To diagnose illness
- To obtain the return of the soul of an ill person
- To resolve disputes
- To appease one's spirit familiars

### Prayers, Chants, Songs, and Rituals Associated with the Calendrical Cycle

- Change of season or seasonal activities
- For eclipses
- Phases of the moon
- The ascension of constellations

### Prayers, Chants, Songs, and Rituals to Obtain Sacred Powers

- To be invincible in battle
- To protect one from adversity
- To obtain a protective spirit

### Prayers, Chants, and Rituals for Sorcery, Witchcraft, and Magic

- To cast love magic
- To cure love magic
- To poison, kill, or debilitate an adversary
- To prevent stealing
- To locate stolen property
- To influence a trial
- To cause an accident
- To make ill
- To cause ill fortune
- To protect from witchcraft and sorcery
- To make charms
- To locate cause of ill fortune
- To make purifying or curing water

### Legal Precedents

- Accounts of legal precedents

## Stories for Entertainment

## Hymns of Praise for Honoring Distinguished Persons

## Additional Poetry<sup>4</sup>

- Historical poetry
- Poetry in praise of deeds and famous men
- Love poetry
- Lyrical poetry
- Laments

## Word Play

## Proverbs and Riddles

## Songs

## NOTES

- 1 This article originally appeared in the *Borneo Research Bulletin* Vol. 22 No. 2; September 1990. I am indebted to Vinson H. Sutlive, Jr., Donald E. Brown, and Ida Nicolaisen for comments and suggestions on an original version of this guide.
- 2 In each of the following categories of prayers, chants, songs, and rituals the researcher has to be alert to the use of special lexicons or languages in any particular activity. Usually there are tabooed utterances associated with each of the activities, and it is useful to attempt to record these for each of the types of oral heritage in this guide. Prayers and chants may have a poetic structure and exhibit parallelism in which the first line is in the ordinary lexicon while the second line is in a ritual lexicon consisting of substitute words, archaic vocabulary, etc. By "Prayers, Chants, Songs, and Rituals" I also include verbal formulae associated with the various activities.
- 3 Illness may be associated with soul loss and therefore accounts of how an illness occurred is of importance.
- 4 All the various chants and prayers referred to previously may also be in poetic form.