

# The *Sugi sakit*

## Ritual storytelling in a Saribas Iban rite of healing

CLIFFORD SATHER

### ABSTRACT

This paper describes a Saribas Iban rite of healing called the *Sugi sakit*. What distinguished this rite from other forms of Saribas Iban healing was that it incorporated within its performance a long narrative epic concerned with the adventures and love affairs of an Iban culture hero named Bujang Sugi. Here I explore the language used by Iban priest bards both in telling the Sugi epic and in performing the larger ritual drama in which it was set, and look, in particular, at how the Sugi epic, which was otherwise told for entertainment, was integrated into this drama and recast by the priest bards as they performed the ritual, so that it not only entertained their listeners, but also served as a serious instrument of healing.

### KEYWORDS

Iban; Sarawak (Malaysia); Borneo (Kalimantan); ritual language; storytelling.

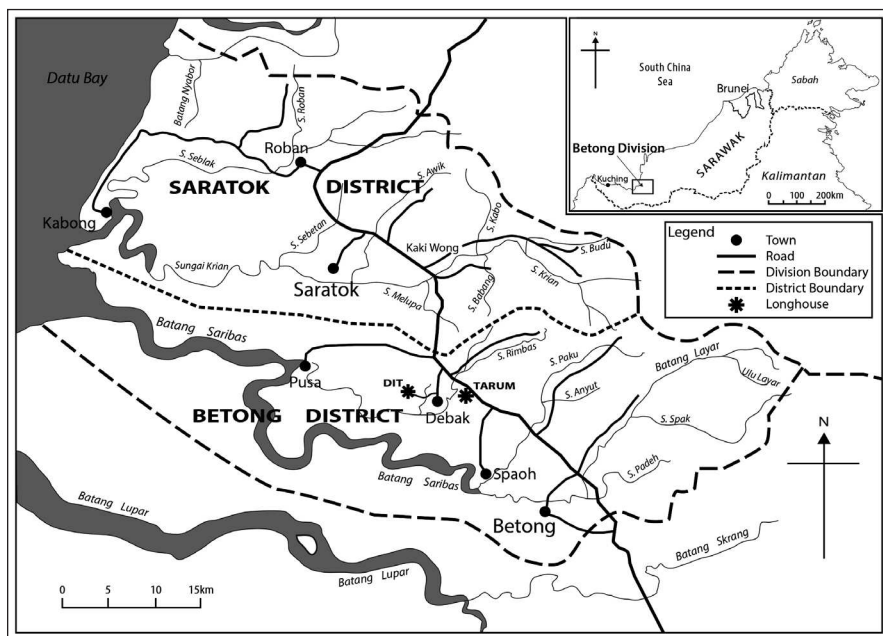
In a recent conference paper on specialized speech genres in Indonesia, Pascal Couderc (2013) observed that among the Uut Danum of the upper Melawi region of West Kalimantan the same speech genres that are used in performing rituals also serve as media of epic storytelling. While storytelling itself is not considered by the Uut Danum as a form of ritual, oral epics, particularly those concerned with upper-world spirits, or *songiang*, are sometimes told in conjunction with rituals and their telling is generally thought to confer material benefits upon the audiences that take part in these storytelling events (Pascal Couderc, personal communication).

My purpose here is to describe a Saribas Iban rite of healing that goes even further and incorporates the telling of an epic narrative directly into its performance, thereby making storytelling an integral part of the ritual itself.

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CLIFFORD SATHER received his PhD in social anthropology from Harvard University in 1971. His publications include *The Bajau Laut; Adaptation, history, and fate in a maritime fishing society of south-eastern Sabah* (Oxford University Press, 1997) and *Seeds of play, words of power; An ethnographic study of Iban shamanic chants* (Tun Jugah Foundation / Borneo Research Council, 2001). He retired as Professor Emeritus from the University of Helsinki in 2005 and is currently editor of the *Borneo Research Bulletin*, the annual journal of the Borneo Research Council. Clifford Sather may be contacted at: cliffordsather@hotmail.com.

The ritual that is the focus of this paper, the *Sugi sakit*, was performed, until its demise some twenty-five years ago, by Iban priest bards in what is today the Betong Division of western Sarawak (Map 1).<sup>1</sup> As far as we know, the *Sugi sakit* was never performed outside of the Betong Division, either by Iban priest bards in other parts of Sarawak, or in the neighbouring Indonesian province of West Kalimantan.<sup>2</sup>



Map 1. Betong and Saratok Districts, Betong Division, Sarawak.

Until the recent, and now all-but-complete conversion of the Saribas Iban to Christianity, ritual life in the Saribas was largely the work of ritual specialists, most notably priest bards (*lemambang*), shamans (*manang*), and soul guides (*tukang sabak*) (see Sather 2001: 5-13). The great majority of priest bards were men, as were most shamans, while virtually all soul guides were women. Of these specialists, shamans were the principal healers (Sather 2001). However, some afflictions were thought to be beyond the reach of shamanic

<sup>1</sup> The Betong Division was created in 2002 and is comprised of the former Saribas and Kalaka Districts which in the pre-Malaysia era made up the northern third of what was then the Second Division of Sarawak. In 2010, the total Iban population of the Betong Division was 44,781 (Malaysia 2012).

<sup>2</sup> The Iban are the most populous Dayak group in western Borneo. Tracing their origins to the Kapuas river basin of West Kalimantan, Iban speakers began migrating northward, crossing what is now the international border beginning some four to four and a half centuries ago. Today the great majority, numbering over 700,000, inhabits the east Malaysian state of Sarawak. A smaller number, estimated at 14,000, continue to live in West Kalimantan, chiefly along the low-lying border region known in Iban as the *Emperan* or 'Flat Land' (Wadley and Kuyah 2001: 716-719; Wadley 2004). During the last century, Iban have also migrated northward from Sarawak to neighbouring Brunei Darussalam and Sabah while still others, many of them labour migrants, now live in Peninsular Malaysia (Sather 2004: 623).

healing, responding only to the direct intervention of the gods (*petara*), and so came within the domain of the priest bards whose primary ritual function was that of invoking the gods and of bringing them into direct contact with their human clients. The *Sugi sakit* was one such form of intervention and was performed primarily for the middle-aged and elderly, those often seen as nearing the end of their lives, who were either chronically ill or suffered afflictions that resisted all other forms of treatment.

The epic that was incorporated in the *Sugi sakit* centered on the adventures and love affairs of a hero known in the narrative as Bujang ('bachelor/young man') Sugi. Like virtually all Iban epics (*ensera*), the story of Bujang Sugi was set in the land of the *orang Panggau*, literally, 'the people of Panggau', an invisible raised world located midway between 'this world' (*dunya tu*) and the 'sky' (*langit*), the home of the most powerful of the Iban gods (Sather 1994: 31-34, 2008: 56). The location of the Panggau world mirrored the role of the *orang Panggau* in the rituals traditionally performed by Saribas Iban priest bards. In these rituals the *orang Panggau* acted as surrogates, hosting the visiting upper-world gods on behalf of the priest bards' human clients. Although Bujang Sugi makes his initial appearance in the Sugi epic in disguise, as a nameless stranger, he is, in fact, Keling, the leader of the *orang Panggau*, and Sedinang, the woman he marries in the story, is Kumang, Keling's wife in the Iban epic tradition. Although referred to as *orang*, or 'human beings', the *orang Panggau* are, in fact, 'spirits' (*antu*), and are often described as the *Bunsu Antu*, the most benevolent of the spirits. As such, they often aid human beings and like the Uut Danum *Songiang*, are thought to be ancestral beings, who in the distant past, lived as one in this world with the ancestors of the present-day Iban. Versions of the Bujang Sugi epic were also told as a form of longhouse entertainment. Entertainment versions of the Sugi epic, which were commonly told over as many as four or five consecutive nights, were called the *Sugi semain*, literally, the 'Sugi for play (*main*)', and were sung by both priest bards and lay storytellers.<sup>3</sup> Healing versions of the story were known as the *Sugi sakit*, literally, the 'Sugi for sickness (*sakit*)' and were sung only by priest bards during the *Sugi sakit*, either over one or two nights, depending upon the wishes of those sponsoring the ritual.

I begin by presenting a brief description of the *Sugi sakit*, followed by an account of language used both in telling the Sugi epic and composing the larger verbal drama in which it was set. I conclude by addressing, more specifically, the question of how a narrative epic, otherwise related for entertainment, was recast by the priest bards, integrated into their performance of the *Sugi sakit* ritual, and so made to serve not only as an entertainment, but as a powerful instrument of healing.

First, however, it is necessary to say something about the nature of rituals in a Saribas Iban context and about the work of the priest bards as ritual healers.

<sup>3</sup> The latter included women as well as men. While singing, the storyteller sat in a swing (*tali wa'*) while his audience sat around him on the gallery floor. During the *Sugi sakit*, the priest bard sang the Sugi story in the same way, while seated on a swing. *Ensera* were also sung on boat journeys or in forest camps during hunting or fishing expeditions.

### “WORK”, “RITUAL” AND “DRAMA” IN AN IBAN SETTING

For the Iban, performances such as the *Sugi sakit* are called *pengawa'*. The Iban term *pengawa'* derives from the root word *gawa'*, meaning, literally, 'work', 'business', or, more generally, 'any purposeful activity', 'anything important or serious that has to be done' (see Richards 1981: 96). Farm work, for example, is also *pengawa'* (Sather 1992: 108), but so, too, are performances that we would describe in English as “rituals”. In other words, there is no separate term in Iban that distinguishes rituals in general from other kinds of work, although there are specific labels for particular kinds of rituals, such as the *Sugi sakit*. For the Iban, performing the *Sugi sakit* was therefore an instance of work. It was, moreover, a kind of work that was the special province of the priest bards, although other participants, including sponsors and a lay audience, were also essential in carrying it out.

In performing the work that was their special province, Iban ritual specialists – not only priest bards – but also shamans and soul guides – did so primarily by using words to create what the Iban call a *main*, meaning, literally, a 'play', 'drama', or 'entertainment'. The *Sugi sakit*, when performed, including both its ritual drama and the story of Bujang Sugi contained within it, was described, in totality, as the *main Sugi sakit*, literally, 'the Sugi sakit play', and the act of performing it was referred to as *bemain Sugi sakit*, literally, 'to perform' or 'enact the Sugi sakit drama'.

Although I had witnessed a performance of the *Sugi sakit* in 1977, during the first days of my fieldwork in the Saribas, it was not until 2003 that I was able to begin a serious study of the ritual.<sup>4</sup> In June 2003, accompanied by my wife, Louise, and our Iban co-worker, Mr. Jantan Uambat, we recorded over six nights (10-12, 16-18 June) a performance of the *main Sugi sakit* sung, with detailed commentary, by Lemambang Renang anak Jabing of Tarum longhouse in the Debak Sub-District of the Betong Division. In the late 1970s, when I began fieldwork in the Saribas, many families living along the Paku River where I was working at the time identified themselves as Christians. However, longhouse ritual life was still little affected by Christianity and the *Sugi sakit* was very much alive. All of that was beginning to change, however. Already, primary education was universal and an expanding network of highways linked the Betong Division to Kuching and other major urban centres in Sarawak. Consequently, over the next twenty years much of what I describe in this paper ceased to exist, including, by the 1990s, the *Sugi sakit* itself.<sup>5</sup>

Meramat anak Empong, the priest bard who had sung the *Sugi sakit* that I had heard performed in 1977, died in December 1988, and by 2003, a decade had passed since the *Sugi sakit* had last been performed. In order to carry out our work, it was therefore necessary to find a priest bard who had regularly

<sup>4</sup> Here, I wish to record my gratitude to the Tun Jugah Foundation, under whose auspices this study was carried out, and, in particular, to its founding Director, Tan Sri Datuk Amar Leonard Linggi Jugah, whose generous support made this study possible.

<sup>5</sup> Lemambang Renang, our principal informant for this study, passed away in February 2007. To the best of my knowledge, he was the last surviving *lemambang* able to perform the *Sugi sakit*.

sung the *Sugi sakit* in the past and was willing to perform it once again. Fortunately, I remembered Renang, who was the son of a major informant from my earlier years of fieldwork. Like his father before him, he had become a priest bard as a young man. As a bard, he had regularly performed the *Sugi sakit* during the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, in both the Paku and Rimbas River areas, but gave up his role as a *lemambang* in the early 1990s, when the whole of his longhouse at Tarum became Christian. At the time, and during our field recording, Renang was headman (*tuai rumah*) of the Tarum longhouse, where all of our recording was done. In August 2004, Louise, Jantan, and I travelled to Rumah Dit (Dit Longhouse), the former home of Lemambang Meramat, and there we recorded a second version of the *main Sugi sakit* performed by two of Meramat's former students (see Pictures 1-3).<sup>6</sup>



Picture 1. Rumah Dit: family and kin of the late Lemambang Meramat with the author (front row, left) and his wife, Louise (back row, second from the right) (photograph by the author, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> Here, I wish to thank Louise and Jantan, both of whom played a crucial part in this study. During our recording, Jantan, a retired Iban educator, novelist and scholar, was a senior member of the Tun Jugah Foundation research staff. Currently he is Research Officer and Officer-in-Charge of the Ethnic Culture Unit in the Sarawak Ministry of Social Development. Our working sessions are documented in some 40 hours of tape recordings, with extensive conversational commentaries. These have been deposited and are available in the Tun Jugah Foundation archives in Kuching, plus a full transcription of our recording sessions with Renang (Sather and Uambat 2004).



Picture 2. Munan and Bada: two performers, former students of Lemambang Meramat, taking turns singing the *Sugi sakit*, Rumah Dit (photograph by the author, 2004).



Picture 3. Jantan Umat: Jantan interviewing Dari anak Alen, sister of the late Lemambang Meramat (photograph by the author, 2004).

As Lemambang Renang (Picture 4) explained during one of our early working sessions, in performing the *Sugi sakit*, priest bards “treated the sick by means of [their] voice (*ngubat orang ke sakit ngena’ nyawa*).”<sup>7</sup> In other words, the *main Sugi sakit* was essentially a verbal drama, although, in performing it, the priest bards also used other media, including staging, ‘stage equipment’ (*perengka*), and elements of physical enactment. In everyday speech, *main* refers to a calculated action, anything done or performed for a purpose, whether competitively, as a game,<sup>8</sup> or, more formally, as a ritual (Barrett 2012: 37; Sather 2012b: xxii). In this sense, the meanings of *main* and *pengawa’* are similar. However, *main* also means a ‘play’, ‘entertainment’, or ‘mime’ (see Sather 2001: 134-35, 2005: 142) and, in this sense, *main* and *pengawa’* differ. Like “play” in English, *main* connotes, in particular, a dramatic enactment. While in English, “work” and “play” represent opposites, in Iban, *pengawa’* and *main* are seen as complementary, rather than oppositional categories. Every ritual that makes use of *main* contains an element of entertainment, but as a form of “work”, this entertainment, or verbal drama, is never, the Iban say, *merindang aja’* (mere diversion), or *bula’* (make-believe), but is performed for a purpose, this purpose being, in the case of the *Sugi sakit*, to heal the sick.



Picture 4. The late Lemambang Renang anak Jabing, priestbard and storyteller (photograph by the author, 1988).

#### THE *RIPIH SUGI SAKIT* : A BRIEF OUTLINE OF EVENTS

No two performances of the *Sugi sakit*, even when sung by the same priest bard, were ever the same, nor was there any expectation that they should be. Each was adapted to the unique circumstances of the occasion. However, every performance was expected to adhere to an ordered sequence of events described in Iban as its *ripih*.

<sup>7</sup> More literally, *nyawa* means ‘mouth.’

<sup>8</sup> The game of football, for example, is described by the Iban as *main bol*.

In the case of the *Sugi sakit*, this *ripih* began even before the ritual itself with a meeting of longhouse members (*aum*) called by the sick person's family. During this meeting, the family announced to the others its intentions to hold a *Sugi sakit*. Typically, the family was joined by close relatives living in adjacent apartments, who agreed to share expenses and act as co-sponsors. A general meeting was considered necessary because holding a ritual of this nature impacted everyone living in the community. While in progress, no one could leave to work outside the house, nor could visitors be admitted. During the *aum*, a tentative date was set and the sponsoring families announced the number of visitors they would invite as guests (*pengabang*). Others divided among themselves the various tasks that would need to be done to make the house ready for the ritual. At the conclusion of the meeting, someone was sent to summon the priest bard. Upon their return, the date was settled and parties were sent to surrounding longhouses to invite the visitors.

### SETTING THE STAGE

On the day of the ritual, the first to arrive were generally kindred (*kaban belayan*) who came to assist the sponsoring families with labour and material help. Invited guests (*pengabang*) typically arrived later in the afternoon. As they arrived, they were ceremonially welcomed and invited to enter the longhouse (*niki*). Among those arriving was the priest bard. As a special honour, he was welcomed by his hosts at an open-sided structure, draped in ritual cloth, erected near the foot of the longhouse entry ladder. Here he was received with a prayer ceremony (*biau*). In the past, priest bards were highly revered figures and even if they came from the same longhouse, they were ceremonially received and escorted into the longhouse by members of the sponsoring families (*sida' empuka pengawa'*, 'those who owned the work/ritual'). Inside the house, the priest bard was accorded a seat of honour at the centre of the principal sponsor's outer gallery. In the division of ritual labour that prevailed, "those who owned the work" were responsible for assembling an audience of human *pengabang*, while the priest bard assembled a corresponding audience of invisible *pengabang*. The arrival of the human *pengabang* ended at nightfall, after which time no additional human guests were admitted into the house. The invisible *pengabang* began entering after dark and their reception concluded with the arrival of Bujang Sugi and his upper-world guests shortly before sunrise the following morning.

As guests were welcomed, the ritual's sponsors began to construct, at the centre of the sick person's gallery, the principal structure required for the ritual. This consisted of a raised platform called the *panggau*, partially encircled by a rectangular enclosure made of finely-woven ritual cloth (*pua' kumbu'*). This construction, which was used during all bardic healing rituals, was called, in the special lexicon of the priest bards, the *meligai*. The beauty of the draped cloth from which the walls of the *meligai* were made was said to attract the notice of the gods and spirits, while the structure itself was a sign to these unseen observers that human beings were holding a curing ritual to which they, too, were invited. The *meligai* thus served as both a visual invitation and



a sign of welcome. Its construction, which was initiated with gong music, was followed by an offering ceremony (*biau*), after which offerings were placed in and around the structure and at the entranceway to the open-air verandah (*tanju'*), just outside the house interior, where a divining pig was tethered. These offerings (*piring*) demarcated the ritual stage on which the Sugi drama was about to be enacted and served as primary points of contact between the gods and the ritual's human participants. In the words of the priest bard's *main*, they also provided the gods and spirits with a sumptuous feast.

As soon as this offering ceremony was over, the priest bard left the gallery and entered the sick person's family-apartment. In doing so, he signaled the formal beginning of the *Sugi sakit*. Inside the apartment, he began for the first time to sing as family members escorted the patient out onto the gallery. This journey, accompanied by gong music and the priest bard's singing, was deliberately slowed to allow the observing gods and spirits time to witness and react with compassion to what was occurring. Once inside the *meligai*, the patient was installed on the platform, where he or she was made comfortable with bedding and cushions.

One side of the *meligai*, through which the escorting party entered, was left open. This faced the swing (*tali wa'*) on which the priest bard sat as he sang the *main Sugi sakit*, including, later in the night, the story of Bujang Sugi.

A major object of the *Sugi sakit* was to restore the diminished visibility of the sick person by making him the central focus of visual scrutiny for everyone taking part in the ritual. The fact that an illness had not responded to other forms of treatment suggested that the patient and, perhaps, the whole community, no longer enjoyed the protective attention of the gods and spirit heroes. Consequently, the opening act of the *Sugi sakit* drama was to remove the patient from the seclusion of his family's apartment and install him at the centre of the longhouse gallery.<sup>9</sup> Although enclosed on three sides by walls of ritual cloth, the enclosure in which the ailing patient was placed was meant to safeguard him, not to separate him from the rest of the community or render him invisible. On the contrary, the walls of cloth were intended to attract notice, to arrest the eyes of all who beheld them, signaling to humans and spirits alike that inside was a loved one, dangerously ill and in need of their care. In addition, the open side of the *meligai* not only faced the priest bard's swing, but was oriented toward what the Iban call the *ujung ramu* ('tip of the beams') (see Picture 5). This orientation, relative to the long axis of the longhouse (see Sather 1993: 76-78), ensured that the gods and spirit heroes would have to come completely inside the longhouse in order to be able to see into the *meligai*,<sup>10</sup> and that the priest bard would not have his back to them when they first entered. Thus, the structure was oriented in a way that was

<sup>9</sup> This was in marked contrast to the healing rituals performed by Saribas Iban shamans. During these rituals, called *pelian*, the patient remained offstage, inside his family's apartment, while the shaman performed his *main* on the gallery (Sather 2001: 154-155).

<sup>10</sup> That is, they could not merely "peep" into the *meligai* from the nearest longhouse entrance. See Sather 1993 for a detailed account of the ritual significance of architectural features of Saribas Iban longhouses.

welcoming and invited visitors not only to approach, but to enter the enclosure and attend upon the patient inside.



Picture 5. Bada tying strings of popped rice to the priest bard's swing. To the right, the swing of the priest bard's spirit helpers (photograph by the author, 2004).

As soon as the sick person was installed in the *meligai*, a procession was formed to groom, anoint, and feed the divining pig on the verandah. Following this, the ritual was temporarily suspended for an evening meal served by the sponsoring families to their invited guests along the outer gallery (*pantar*). As soon as it was over, the priest bard resumed singing, beginning with a prologue called the *sempalai*.<sup>11</sup> This represented a playful interlude meant to capture his audience's attention. It also formed a transition to the serious ritual work that followed. In it, the priest bard described his *sempalai* as a song of praise sung for the *meligai*. In doing so, he referred to the *meligai*, not by the term's priestly meaning, but by its common language meaning, to refer to the traditional sleeping place of the young unmarried women of the longhouse. Hence, the structure now became, in the words of the priest bard's *main*, a maiden's bed, with its walls of ritual cloth, a mosquito curtain. No longer a sickbed, it now represented the site of traditional courtship. While praising the *meligai*, the priest bard also described in poetic language the surrounding gallery. Night had fallen and all around him were throngs of handsome bachelors and beautiful maidens. The latter were urging him to sing a love song. All of this was a fitting prologue, for the Sugi epic he would soon sing was, as we shall see, essentially a love story. Without a break, he then shifted to a new song called *ngadingka lemambang*, 'to introduce' or 'make ready the

<sup>11</sup> The term *sempalai* derives from the root word *empalai*, meaning, literally, 'a fenced garden' (Richards 1981: 380).

priest bard' in which he summoned his spirit helpers (*yang*). As he sang, he shifted the perspective of his *main* from the immediate setting, the plight of his patient and the mood of his audience, to the unseen world, where, as he sang, the gods and spirits were described as gazing down from above, taking note of the *meligai* and the activities occurring around it. At this point, he then began a new song, this one an invocation of the Shaman Gods (*nurunka petara manang*), inviting them to descend to this world in order to take part in the ritual as divine healers.

#### ARRIVAL OF THE SHAMAN GODS (*PETARA MANANG*)

First, however, before this invocation began, there was a brief break. The sponsors arranged their guests in order of precedence (*bedijir*) along the outer gallery, and, as they did so, the priest bard returned to his swing. In his *main*, the Shaman Gods now began their descent, travelling by way of various mountaintops, where they were joined by additional followers. These gods included both celestial shamans and the ancestral spirits of once-living *manang* (Sather 2012a: 123-124). Both acted in this world as spirit companions of human shamans, accompanying them on their soul journeys. As they arrived in the longhouse, the priest bard commanded them to enter the *meligai* and treat the sick person with their medicines. In this way he tapped into the healing power of the shamans by enlisting the direct intervention of their spirit companions.

The priest bard now took a break from singing, as members of the host longhouse formed a procession to welcome the newly arrived gods (*ngalu petara*). Accompanied by musicians carrying gongs, this procession made a complete circle of the gallery, coming to a stop in front of the guests seated along the *pantar*. Hosts and guests then began a ritual pantomime. A spokesman for the guests asked why the hosts had performed a welcoming procession. A spokesman for the latter replied that someone in the longhouse had fallen ill and that everyone was troubled lest the sick person dies.<sup>12</sup> Therefore they had summoned the gods who had now joined them in the longhouse. The spokesman for the visitors then replied that, while they were not gods themselves, they were their 'representatives' (*pengari*) and so spoke on their behalf. He then announced that the gods were truly present and that they had treated the patient with powerful medicines they had brought with them from the upper-world.

With the Shaman Gods now present, it was time for the main event of the *Sugi sakit*: the telling of the Bujang Sugi epic. However, before we turn our attention to this epic, it is necessary to say something about the language used in performing it and the larger *Sugi sakit* drama in which it was set.

<sup>12</sup> These spokesmen were called *manuk sabung*, literally, 'fighting cocks'.

## THE LANGUAGE OF THE MAIN SUGI SAKIT: LEKA MAIN AND THE IBAN LINGUISTIC REPERTOIRE

The *main Sugi sakit* was composed, like other ritual *main*, in a highly marked, poetic speech register called *leka main*, meaning, literally, the ‘seeds’ or ‘words of play’ (Sather 2001: 1-3). As such, *leka main* represents part of what sociolinguists would call the Iban “linguistic repertoire”, that is, part of the totality of linguistic resources which members of the Iban speech community regularly employed in their social interactions with one another (see Gumperz 1964; Gumperz and Hymes 1986; Hymes 1986). Within this repertoire are a number of distinctive ways of speaking that community members shifted between in different social situations, each with its own characteristics and appropriate contexts of use. *Leka main* represented one such way of speaking. While a mastery of *leka main* was especially associated with the priest bards, *leka main* was, by no means, a priestly code intelligible only to ritual specialists. Longhouse elders and other community leaders also made regular use of *leka main* as a form of rhetorical or authoritative speech, when, for example, conducting community meetings or settling disputes, while storytellers, singers, and raconteurs used it as a narrative language for storytelling, for singing love songs, engaging in word play or other forms of verbal entertainment. Verbal artistry was highly valued in the past and anyone with the necessary time and ability was free to master the use of *leka main*, and those who did so gained considerable respect as a consequence.

### POETIC STRUCTURE: RHYME, AND MELODY

*Leka main* differs from everyday conversational Iban in a number of important respects. The most important of these are its poetic structure, the degree of interpretative effort required to master its use, and the fact that, when used by ritual specialists, *leka main* was always sung or chanted. *Leka main* also differs from conversational Iban in terms of its syntax, owing chiefly to the demands of rhyme, and, more importantly, lexically, drawing heavily on a special speech genre that the Iban call *jaku’ dalam*, meaning, literally, ‘deep speech’.

The systematic use of rhyme is a major distinguishing feature of *leka main*. Iban describe poetic composition using the term *telian*, literally, ‘falling in drops’, from the root word, *nelian* (verb form), meaning ‘to string together’ (see Richards 1981: 377). *Telian* are divided into *enteli* or *enteli main*. Each *enteli* consists of a group of two or more lines of varying length, with each line typically sharing the same end-rhyme syllable. Hence, an *enteli* may be described as a poetically marked stanza (Sather 2001: 163). Most Saribas ritual specialists recognize six named varieties of *enteli main*, plus several minor unnamed ones. These six varieties are called:

1. *lebu ngidan*, with an end rhyme of *-an* or *-am*;
2. *lebu bedaja*, with an end rhyme of *-a* or *-a’*;<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> In Sather 2001: 163, I refer to this variety as *lebu nyangka*. Jantan Uambat (personal correspondence) informs me that, although not incorrect, the more commonly used term is *lebu bedaja*.

3. *lebu nagai*, with an end rhyme of *-ai*;
4. *lebu ngadang*, with an end rhyme of *-ang*;
5. *lebu nyangkung*, with an end rhyme of *-ung*; and
6. *lebu nangi*, with an end rhyme of *-i*.

Minor end rhymes include *-uk*, *-au*, and *-ak*.

To illustrate, here are two examples drawn from the *main Sugi sakit*: the first from Lemambang Renang's invocation of the Shaman Gods at the point when the gods arrive at the patient's longhouse and first catch sight of the *meligai*. Here the *enteli main* is in *lebu nyangkung* form, namely, with a dominant *-ung* end rhyme [underlined for emphasis]. Note, the last line of this stanza shifts to an *-ang* end rhyme, indicating a stanza transition, in this case to a stanza of dialogue with a dominant *-ang* end rhyme. Note, too, that most lines are also characterized by internal and/or medial rhyme.

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <i>Dia' sida' iya telengga' lama'</i><br><i>tengen<u>ung</u>,</i>  | There they stare for a long time, stunned and<br>speechless,   |
| <i>Sida' nentang enggau bulang</i><br><i>mata menchen<u>ung</u>,</i>                                       | As they behold with surprise, before them,<br>within the range of their sight,                         |
| <i>Meda' meligai panggau gant<u>ung</u></i><br><i>enggi' Apai Jenawang</i><br><i>Bujang Lemp<u>ung</u></i> | The <i>meligai</i> , suspended, a raised platform<br>belonging to Father of an Agile<br>Young Bachelor |
| <i>Nya' orang ke sakit ke di kulit kandang</i><br><i>pungg<u>ung</u>,</i>                                  | Who is sick in the skin covering his lower<br>back,  |
| <i>Bekajangka tengkebang ampang</i><br><i>belump<u>ung</u>,</i>  | Having for its roof a skillfully-woven<br><i>ampang belumpung</i> cloth,                               |
| <i>Nya' alai kaki tisi nya' manah</i><br><i>mati sulam ragi benang gad<u>ung</u>,</i>                      | With a beautiful border woven<br>of light green thread,  |
| <i>Punggang puting setak begamal</i><br><i>lep<u>ung</u>-lep<u>ung</u>,</i>                                | Set off so that its fringes appear to be<br>floating,  |
| <i>Ngambi' gambar ular tedung betamp<u>ung</u></i><br><i>jalih kendawang.</i>                              | Having the form of a cobra blended<br>with a coral snake.  |

Here is another example, this one in *lebu ngadang* form, with an *-ang* end rhyme. This stanza comes from the Bujang Sugi story and describes the hero as he prepares to enter Father of Rimbu's longhouse for the first time (Sather Forthcoming):

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <i>Anak Temuai tak ngaduka gamal manah</i><br><i>ke deduah puji day<u>ang</u>,</i>               | The Visitor then carefully arranges his bearing<br>so that young women will pour out their praise. |
| <i>Aduka iya gamal sigat kijap-kijap mand<u>ang</u></i><br><i>ke atap jaung jeren<u>ang</u>;</i> | He arranges his handsome form so that he will<br>sparkle, lighting up the red roof-thatch;         |

Tak liau-liau Anak Temuai mandang  
ke kasau purang dibalang,

Radiating light, The Visitor glows,  
causing the rafters hewn of purang wood to gleam.

Here and in the first example, the end of each stanza is also marked by the use of a pair of words that repeat the final end-rhyme, for example, *tedung betampung* in the first example and *purang dibalang* in the second. Not all stanzas are as consistent in their use of end-rhyme. Those who are especially skilled in poetic composition are expected to vary the rhyme from time to time, while still maintaining a single predominant pattern. This prevents their singing from becoming monotonous. In addition, breaking a rhyme pattern may be used as a way of emphasizing a particular word or phrase or to signal the end of a stanza or, more often, the end of an episode. Episode transitions are also indicated by the insertion of a meaningless *wai* particle into one of the last lines immediately preceding the transition. In episodes of dialogue, which occur frequently, the requirements of rhyme are often relaxed and conversation is frequently represented as naturally occurring prose.

#### PATAH NYAWA LEMAMBANG: THE PRIEST BARD'S SINGING STYLE

When used in the composition of ritual *main*, *leka main* is always sung.<sup>14</sup> Each type of ritual specialist makes use of a distinctive vocalization style unique to his or her calling. These styles, which are instantly recognizable to Iban audiences, are called *patah nyawa*. The term *patah* means, literally, 'bend', 'break', 'fold', or 'change course', while, in this context, *nyawa* means 'voice'. Thus, *patah nyawa* describes the particular "tune", "melody", or way in which a singer "bends" his voice while singing. Priest bards, when performing their *main*, characteristically sing in a style called *patah nyawa lemambang*; shamans in one called *patah nyawa manang*, and soul guides, *patah nyawa tukang sabak*. The style in each case is adapted to the special features of the *main* that each type of ritual specialist performs. In the case of the *main Sugi sakit*, the *leka main* is always sung solo by a single priest bard without any form of instrumental accompaniment.

Compared to shamans and soul guides, the priest bard's singing style is relatively straightforward. Typically, a priest bard sings with a firm, moderately loud voice, with little melodic ornamentation. His singing is essentially syllabic, that is, a single syllable of text is sung on a single note with little divergence from this pattern. By contrast, a soul guide or dirge singer (*tukang sabak*) sings with a softer voice, and with melodic lines typically punctuated by sobs, especially near or at the end of a stanza (see Matusky 2012: 128). A unique feature of the soul guide's vocalization style is an extreme use of the vocal glide from one pitch to another, producing a wailing sound.<sup>15</sup> In contrast to the predominantly syllabic singing style of the priest bard, the shaman's style is characterized by a mixture of syllabic and melismatic singing.

<sup>14</sup> *Leka main* is not usually sung on other occasions except during epic storytelling.

<sup>15</sup> The term *sabak* (verb form, *nyabak*), used to describe the Iban death dirge, means, literally, 'sob' or 'weep'.

A vocal technique peculiar to Saribas shamans is a shaking, or tremolo, of the voice on sustained tones. This adds a considerable element of tension to their singing (see Sather 2001: 166-167).

Compared to shamans and soul guides, priest bards use fewer musical motifs and their singing is characteristically marked by small leaps upward to a given reciting tone, and in some instances, gliding downward from one reciting tone to another (see Matusky 2012: 129). By contrast, shamans sing extremely fluid melodies, with both ascending and descending contours. The comparatively direct singing style of the priest bards is well-suited to invocations, prayers, and storytelling, while the more intense, fluid, and emotion-loaded melodies of the shamans fit the dramatic soul journeys that they portray in their *pelian* (Sather 2001: 172-177).

Line length varies with tempo; with individual lines, phrases, or run-on lines generally sung on a single breath. Where passages have a marked melodic form, changes of melody, which may occur within a single line, are characteristically marked by a pause and intake of breath. Lines are combined to form stanzas which are normally distinguished by pauses and changes of rhyme pattern. In addition, they are often melodically defined. In the *main Sugi*, these melodic motifs are most pronounced during the early part of the ritual, when the priest bard, while invoking the Shaman Gods, briefly uses the singing style of a *manang*. By contrast, the vocalization style of the *lemambang* has, as we have noted, a more limited melodic range and is less marked by ornamental motifs. New stanzas may be opened with a repetition of the final passage or a repeated end-rhyming syllable, or syllables, from the last line of the preceding stanza, and are often terminated with a signature closing melody. Some stanzas, particularly those featuring dramatic action or dialogue, have little musical marking and are usually sung as a single continuous melody. The sequence of stanzas is highly structured and stanzas can be shortened or deleted to fit a performance into a predetermined time frame. In the case of the *Sugi sakit*, the priest bard must conclude his performance before dawn so that he can return the gods to the sky before what, in the reversed time of the upper-world, is nightfall. Thus, like oral poetry generally (Dobbs 1964: 15), *leka main* has a “concertina-like structure”; when time is ample, the oral poet can sing at length, but when time is short, he leaves out stanzas or even whole episodes while, nonetheless, preserving the overall structure of what he does sing.

Finally, the rhythm of *leka main*, including the Sugi narrative, reflects the rhythm inherent in Iban oral poetry generally. As Matusky (2012: 129) has noted, an overall musical meter is not discernible in any of the *leka main* forms sung by Saribas Iban ritual specialists. What is heard, instead, is a 2-beat stress pattern of a weak stress (or a note of short duration) followed by a strong stress (or a note of long duration), resulting in an overall end-accented rhythmic pattern.

LANGUAGE DEPTH AND THE *LEKA MAIN* LEXICON

In composing their *main*, Iban priest bards draw heavily on *jaku' dalam*, or 'deep speech', as opposed to *jaku' mabu'*, 'shallow speech', the supposedly transparent language of everyday conversation. *Jaku' dalam* is said to be more profound than *jaku' mabu'*, or 'shallow speech'. It 'hides' or 'encloses' (*ngarung*) 'meaning' (*reti*), whereas *jaku' mabu'* is said to be 'clear' (*terang*) and 'direct' (*terus*) (Sather 2001: 167, 2005: 156-158). The Iban use the terms 'shallow' (*mabu'*) and 'deep' (*dalam*) to refer to both speech and meanings. Depth refers to the degree of difficulty of interpretation: the deeper the meaning, the harder it is to interpret. Deep meanings are typically opaque and so encourage interpretation. They are also frequently multi-layered and so add dimension to the areas of social life in which they are used. Language depth is also a way of showing 'respect' (*basa*), as when speaking, for example, of rice, addressing one's elders, or describing the actions of human souls, spirits, or the gods.<sup>16</sup> Meanings are often couched indirectly in a riddle-like form, hence, such speech may also be called *jaku' sempama*, or 'riddling speech'.

In Sarawak, Iban scholars have long taken an interest in *jaku' dalam*. As a result, there exists an extensive Iban-language literature on the topic, including a published lexicon of over 9,400 *jaku' dalam* entries (Ensiring and Menua 2006). The great majority of these are multiple-word metaphorical expressions, many of which function in oral composition as formulaic elements. Characteristically, they incorporate considerable semantic redundancy and a moderate degree of parallelism.<sup>17</sup> More importantly, they point up the significant role that *leka main* plays in oral performance. Like oral poets generally (see Lord 2000), Iban priest bards, in performing their *main*, do not reproduce a fixed text from memory, but, rather, compose as they perform. In doing so, they draw on a large stock of recurring formulas, many of them taken from this deep language lexicon.

What is important to note is that, while Saribas Iban ritual specialists drew heavily on *jaku' dalam*, the verbal dramas they created were never composed entirely in deep speech. Instead, they continually shifted the language they used from shallow to deep and back again. This variation was central to how these ritual dramas were constructed (Sather 2001: 167-169, 2005). For example, priest bards typically used shallow language in the opening lines of their *main* to capture their audiences' attention - referring first to what was immediately apparent - the time of night, the longhouse setting, the patient and the nature of his or her illness. Later, through deep-language imagery, they introduced their audiences to the miraculous landscapes in which the Bujang Sugi story unfolded and through hyperbole and metaphor, described the extraordinary deeds of the story's heroes and heroines. Language depth also shifted between transparent scenes of dramatic action and deep language

<sup>16</sup> Elements of deep speech used to show respect are also called *jaku' basa*, 'respectful speech'.

<sup>17</sup> Parallelism is by no means as canonical and recurrent a feature of Iban *leka main* as it is of eastern Indonesian ritual speech (Fox 1971, 1974, 1988, 2005), nor, it seems, of Ngaju *basa sangiang* (Kuhnt-Saptodewo 1999; Fox 1977).



descriptions of unseen realities. By controlling language depth and moving between shallow and deep speech, priest bards were able to signal bridging movements between the seen and unseen, what was immediately apparent and what was hidden, and, through acts of descriptive disclosure, they were able to identify the hidden causes of affliction and engage their audiences in a collective work of healing.<sup>18</sup>

Individual words and phrases often differed in *leka main* from those used in ordinary speech. Although their meaning was challenging, only rarely were these words and phrases “too deep” to be translated into ordinary speech. Loanwords, especially from Malay, occasionally occur in the *leka main*, but their use is neither systematic nor extensive. Individual words are sometimes said to represent *jaku’ lama’*, ‘ancestral speech’, but, again, these words are comparatively rare. By contrast, accounts of ritual speech in other Borneo societies suggest a more extensive use of loanwords and obsolete vocabulary. Peter Metcalf (1989), for example, has described the systematic use of loanwords in the composition of Berawan prayers, while, by contrast, the most extensively described Borneo “priestly language”, the Ngaju *basa sangiang* (or *sangen*) (see Kuhnt-Saptodewo 1993, 1999; Schärer 1966), appears to be composed, at least in part, of an archaic speech stratum common to both the Ngaju and the linguistically-related Uut Danum (Couderc 2013). While *basa sangiang* is employed particularly in death rituals, the principal language used in healing rituals, sometimes called *basa belian*, appears to draw more heavily on loanwords from non-local languages. Thus, among related Luangan groups in East and Central Kalimantan, healing rituals are typically divided into a number of specific genres, each drawing on a different non-local language. Among the Luangan-speaking Bentian, for example, *belian bawo* healing rituals, which are said to have originated with the Bawo Dayak, make substantial use of the Bawo language together with other local Luangan isolects, while *belian sentiu*, another healing genre, draws on Kutai Malay and Indonesian to the extent that *belian sentiu* rituals are sometimes performed entirely in Malay (see Sillander 1995, 2004, 2006).

By contrast, deep and shallow speech are both seen by Saribas Iban ritual specialists as variant forms existing within the Iban repertoire, consisting, by and large, of neither obsolete nor borrowed vocabulary. In constructing their ritual dramas, priest bards not only shifted between deep and shallow speech, but they also frequently played upon this variation by inserting everyday words into their *leka main*, thereby altering their meaning. For example, after summoning his spirit helpers, Renang described in his *ngadingka lemambang* the leader of the Shaman Gods, Raja Manang, scanning through his crystal the human longhouse where the ritual was being held (Sather Forthcoming):

<sup>18</sup> Elsewhere, I have discussed at length how Saribas Iban shamans manipulated language depth in constructing their *pelian* rituals (Sather 2001: 167-170, 2005).

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <p><i>Dia' lalu berpandang dih Raja Manang ka ulang arung jalai;</i><br/> <i>Lalu sigau yang batu ilau ke leliau tampak lempai-lempai.</i></p> | <p>Now Raja Manang scans from afar, viewing a well-frequented road;<br/>         The bard's spirit helpers are in a state of commotion, as seen, bright and clear, through his crystal seeing-stone.</p> |
|--|--|

A “seeing stone” is the principal diagnostic tool used by Saribas Iban shamans (Sather 2001: 130-132).<sup>19</sup> Raja Manang's crystal is first referred to in this passage as a *batu ilau*, a deep language term used in the *leka main*. In ordinary Iban, a shaman's seeing stone is called a *batu karas*, meaning, literally, a ‘translucent stone’.<sup>20</sup> A few stanzas later, however, Raja Manang, still scanning the human world, spies the divining pig on the longhouse verandah:

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <p><i>Lalu berpandang dih Raja Manang enggau batu kinyang peda' terang mandang menua,</i><br/> <i>Peda' iya pugu' tanju' tak letu'-letu' kajang kumbu' babi sepa.</i></p> | <p>Then Raja Manang scans with his translucent stone seeing a brightly shining country, Behold, there at the base of the open-air verandah, a handsome roof of ritual cloth covers a sow that has once born young.</p> |
|---|--|

Here, Raja Manang's crystal is now referred to as a *batu kinyang*. *Batu kinyang* is a shallow language term for an ordinary stone (*batu*), which, like the *batu karas*, is translucent. By inserting *kinyang* into his *leka main*, Renang transforms its meaning so that it now refers to a shaman's “seeing stone”. In both cases, Renang's choice of words satisfies the requirements of medial rhyme, in the first case, rhyming *ilau* with *sigau* (commotion), and in the second, *kinyang* with *Manang* (shaman). While rhyming, Renang's choice of words also represents a clever play upon the deep and shallow meanings of ‘translucent’ vs. ‘seeing’, ordinary stones vs. shamans' crystals.

#### THE EFFICACY OF WORDS

The language used in ritual is often seen by those who employ it as a medium of sacred power (see Tambiah 1968). However, as Robert Hefner (1985: 212) reminds us, “There is no reason to assume that the conditions sustaining faith in the efficacy of ritual language are necessarily the same in all societies”. In the case of *leka main*, when used by priest bards, it served as both a medium of sacred power and a means of verbal entertainment. Pascal Couderc, in the conference paper (2013) referred to at the beginning of this essay, briefly described three Uut Danum performance genres. Like *leka main*, all three are sung, each in a distinctive singing style. Two, *parung* and *tahtum*, are sung primarily by men, while the third, which is the principal concern of Couderc, *kandan*, is sung by women. Unlike Saribas *leka main*, *kandan* is described by the Uut Danum as a distinct ‘language’ (*auh*) and, as such, is contrasted with *dohoi*, the language of ordinary conversation. This distinction

<sup>19</sup> Used particularly to determine the whereabouts and condition of his patient's soul.

<sup>20</sup> *Ilau* is not the usual term for ‘see’ in Sarawak Iban (which is *peda'*), but is a dialect variant present, for example, in Remun and possibly other “Ibanic” dialects.

thus resembles that between *jaku' dalam* and *jaku' mabu'*, except that *kandan* is said to represent the language of the *Songiang* spirits. This representation provides the ideological basis of *kandan's* perceived effectiveness as a medium of sacred communication. However, *kandan* functions not only as a form of ritual speech, but also, like Iban *leka main*, as a literary genre, used to relate a cycle of epic songs about the spirits of the upper-world. As a ritual genre, it functions most importantly in healing rituals performed by female shamans called *jaja'*. During these rituals, the *jaja'* either relate in the words of the *Songiang* cosmic journeys undertaken by the souls of their patients, or they enter into possession states in which the *Songiang* sing directly through them, appropriating their voice (Couderc 2013: 1). In both instances *kandan* is seen as a medium of direct communication with the upper-world spirits. While *leka main* similarly functions as the appropriate language with which to petition and invoke the gods and spirit heroes and to relate stories concerned with the *orang Panggau*, it is, nonetheless, for the Iban, not a spirit language, but part of their own linguistic repertoire, as Iban-speakers. While individual words that appear in the *leka main* are sometimes described as 'spirit speech' (*jaku' antu*) or the 'language of the Afterworld of the dead' (*jaku' Sebayan*) (see Sather 2001: 167),<sup>21</sup> the ritual dramas composed by Saribas Iban ritual specialists are attributed to the performers themselves, who act during these performances as mediating agents, conveying through their verbal performances the words and intentions of the gods and spirit heroes.

#### THE BUJANG SUGI EPIC

For a priest bard like himself, Renang explained, performing the *Sugi sakit* was both *bemain*, 'to enact a drama', and *becherita*, 'to tell a story (*cherita*)'. Having outlined the *Sugi* drama, in the sections that follow, I first sketch the Bujang *Sugi* story and then address the question of how this story was integrated into the *Sugi sakit* drama.

The principal characters in the *Sugi* story are *orang Panggau*. While they display all of the physical and psychological characteristics of human beings, the *orang Panggau* possess, in addition, superhuman powers, including immortality and, for some, like Keling, the power to transform their appearance at will. As Keling, *Sugi* represents an embodiment of masculine prowess and physical perfection. In the past, Keling acted in this world as a spirit-patron of Iban warriors and successful leaders, while in the *ensera* tradition, he appeared as a wanderer, who, in the course of his travels, assumed many disguises, but whose magical powers and demeanor were such that men everywhere recognized him as a leader, while women fell instantly in love with him. His lovers included not only women of the *orang Panggau* world, but female animal spirits as well, and throughout the *Sugi* story, these animal-spirit lovers appear at crucial times, providing the hero with warnings or charms of invulnerability.

<sup>21</sup> Typically in *jaku' Sebayan* the meaning of everyday words is reversed.

According to Renang, the serious work of the Sugi story occurred at the beginning and end of the narrative, while the middle episodes were told primarily for entertainment. Thus, the opening of the story recreated in a parallel way the predicament of the priest bard's clients. As with illness and prospects of death, there is an absence of visibility. The longhouse in which the story is set is unable to attract visitors. No newcomers cross the top of its entry ladders, its betel nuts go unharvested, and its cooked rice spoils because there are no visitors to feed and entertain. There are no young men to court the young women of the longhouse and the community's aging leader, Father of Rimbu', has no young successor to whom he can impart his knowledge. To rectify this situation, his wife, Mother of Rimbu', calls together the eligible young women of the longhouse and gathers from them their love charms. These charms, called *pemandang*, embody the power of *pandang*, meaning, literally, 'visibility', but here, more fittingly translated as the power of attraction. This first episode Renang called *ngayunka pandang*, 'to arouse the power of [visual] attraction'. As this episode concludes, Mother of Rimbu' activates the young women's love charms and, from the rooftop of the longhouse, releases their power into the air.

As the next episode opens, the hero of the story, at home in his own longhouse, is overcome with longing. And so, he departs for the longhouse of Mother and Father of Rimbu'. Here, disguising his appearance, he presents himself as a stranger and is adopted by Mother and Father of Rimbu'. Being nameless, the couple name him Bujang Sugi. In actuality, he is, however, Keling, although the priest bards, in telling his story, honour his deception and never explicitly identify him as such. The story, in its basic outline, is a version of the classic Austronesian myth of the Stranger King, telling of a visitor from abroad whose arrival transforms the society he visits (see Fox 1995: 217-219, 2008; Sahlin 1981, 2008, 2012). In this case, however, unlike most versions of the myth, the hero does not institute a new line of kingship, or otherwise alter the structure of the society he visits, but, instead, serves briefly as a link between those who commission the telling of his story and the upper-world gods of healing.

A characteristic feature of Stranger King myths is that the transformative power of the stranger, being foreign to the society he visits, must in some way be captured by the host society. Typically this capture comes about through a sexual union between the male visitor and a local woman (or women). In the Sugi story, as soon as the hero enters Father of Rimbu's longhouse, he begins at once to court the longhouse beauty, Endu Dara (Maiden) Semanjan. Semanjan, however, is literally a *femme fatale*. All who attempt to court her perish because she is in mourning for a recently disappeared husband who is presumed to be dead. This husband, however, is none other than Keling himself from a previous visit. Sugi is therefore what Fox (2008: 202) has called a "Returning Outsider". He has come as a stranger to Father and Mother of Rimbu's longhouse before, and in his earlier appearance, he married Semanjan. Keling's object this time is not Semanjan, but Sedinang, the most beautiful of

all the *orang Panggau* women. In the Sugi story, Sedinang is the daughter of Father of Rimbu's brother, Sentukan "The White-Haired", and on their son's behalf, Father and Mother of Rimbu' travel to Sentukan's longhouse and there arrange a marriage between Maiden Sedinang and the hero.

This marriage takes place in Father of Rimbu's longhouse. Here, however, Semanjan, in a jealous rage, challenges her rival to a series of contests to determine which of them is the most slender and comely. Although Sedinang easily wins all of these contests, Sugi refuses to cease his nocturnal visits to Semanjan's sleeping place, and so Sedinang decides to return to her parents. Sugi follows in pursuit and their journey turns into a contest of wills. In the meantime, the enemies of the *orang Panggau*, learning of the couple's journey, prepare an ambush. Forewarned, Sugi shrinks Sedinang to the size of a betel nut and places her for safety inside his dart container. Single-handedly, he then takes on the enemies, defeats them all, taking the heads of their leaders. Restoring Sedinang to her normal size, the couple, now reconciled, enter Sentukan's longhouse, where Sugi is welcomed as a victorious warrior. What occurs next depends on the time available to the priest bard. If the performance is to continue over a second night, the story, at this point, is temporarily suspended. The following night, it begins with a series of added adventures and battles. These typically include the abduction of Sedinang's parents, who are carried off by the arch-enemy of the *orang Panggau*, Apai Sabit Bekait (Father Brass Hooked Chain). Here, Sugi must travel to Father Brass Hooked Chain's longhouse at the upper edge of the sky in order to rescue them. Finally, after the last of these adventures, or, in the case of a one-night performance, immediately following the couple's arrival at Sentukan's longhouse, Bujang Sugi calls a meeting of his father-in-law's followers and announces his intention to hold a ritual celebration to honor his victories, inviting as his guests Selempandai, Biku Bunsu Petara, and other upper-world gods. This celebration, as we shall see presently, is the crucial link that joined the Sugi story to the *Sugi sakit* ritual.

#### MERGING STORYTELLING AND RITUAL

While the term *pengawa'*, as a general label, applied to all rituals, the most elaborate of those performed by Saribas Iban priest bards in the past were called *gawai*, a term that also derives, like *pengawa'*, from the same root word, *gawa'*, meaning 'work'. In addition to the *Sugi sakit*, Saribas priest bards also performed a more general healing ritual called the *Gawai sakit*. In contrast to the *Sugi sakit*, the *Gawai sakit*, like other Iban *gawai*, was performed not by a single priest bard singing solo, or by several bards singing alternative parts of the *main*, but by a 'troupe' (*bala* or *raban*) of bards, typically comprised of a lead bard (*tuai lemambang*), an answering bard (*penyaut*) and a chorus (*pengelembung*) (see Sather 1994: 62-64, 2001: 6-8). Compared to the *Gawai sakit*, the *Sugi sakit* was considered a smaller ritual, a *pengawa'*, but not a *gawai*.

In the past, *gawai*, as the largest rituals conducted by Iban longhouse communities, were performed not only for healing, but for a variety of other

reasons as well, for example, to promote agricultural fertility, to mark the acquisition of prestige wealth, consecrate a new longhouse, or valorize male status and success in warfare. Whatever the task, all *gawai* took basically the same form. Through the medium of their *main*, called more specifically, their *pengap*, the priest bards dispatched unseen spirit ‘messengers’ (*pesan*) into the upper-world, or ‘sky’ (*langit*). In the words of their *main pengap*, these spirit messengers invited individual gods and their followers to descend to this world as the ‘invited guests’ (*pengabang*) of the ritual’s human sponsors so that they might participate with their hosts in whatever work the ritual was meant to accomplish.<sup>22</sup> When the gods arrived in this world, they were, in the words that the priest bards sang, ceremonially received by their human hosts. However, in the priest bards’ *main*, this reception was portrayed as if it were occurring not in this world, but in the intermediating world of the *orang Panggau*. In the ritual enactment that followed the arrival of the gods, the principal human sponsors enacted the parts of spirit heroes and heroines, with the chief sponsoring couple playing the role of the principal leader of the *orang Panggau*, Keling, and his wife, Kumang (see Sather 1996: 97-101). The ritual thus became, in effect, a dramatic enactment by the human participants of a ritual that, as portrayed in the priest bards’ *main*, was taking place in the unseen world of Keling and his followers.

The *Sugi sakit* was organized, as we have seen, very differently. Like a *gawai*, it, too, opened with an invocation. However, this invocation was addressed not to one of the major gods of the Iban pantheon, but, instead, to the Shaman Gods. When these gods arrived, the priest bard invited them, as spirit shamans, to treat the sick person with their special healing powers. In calling for them, he briefly used the singing style of a shaman. The reception of the gods was then enacted through a ritual pantomime performed by the priest bard’s human clients and their guests, after which the gods were invited to stay on to witness the remainder of the ritual.

The principal event that followed was the telling of the *Sugi* narrative. The prime hero of this narrative, *Bujang Sugi*, was, in reality, Keling. Thus, by telling his story, the priest bard evoked the world of the spirit heroes and heroines as in a *gawai*. This evocation, however, was achieved through an act of storytelling, and what took place in the transposed world represented in this story similarly brought the gods into direct contact with the priest bard’s human clients. At the story’s climax, *Sugi* leaves the narrative world in which his story is set and, together with his spirit-hero followers and with *Sempandai*, *Biku Bunsu Petara*, and other Iban gods of healing, he enters the visible world in which the *Sugi sakit* is being performed. Here, he and the gods are described in the *Sugi* story as intervening directly in the ritual by treating the patient with their medicines and special healing powers. This second intervention happens near the conclusion of the *Sugi* story when *Sugi* sponsors a major *gawai* to celebrate his victories as a war leader. At the end of

<sup>22</sup> For the *Gawai sakit*, the principal god invited was *Menjaya* and the messengers who flew to the sky to carry this invitation were spirit bats, *Bujang Kusing* and *Bujang Entawai*.

this *gawai*, he informs his guests that they are now invited by human beings to participate in a work of healing taking place in the human world below. And so, now as the invited guests of the sponsors of the *Sugi sakit*, the gods and spirit heroes accompany Bujang Sugi as he descends to this world and there they join him in treating the priest bard's patient. In this way, Sugi's *gawai* – a narrated ritual – is merged momentarily with an actual ritual, and the two events, one narrated, the other physically performed, become, for a brief moment, one and the same.

The gods of healing descend in this instance, not from the upper-world directly, as they do during a *gawai*, but come by way of the narrative world created by the priest bard's act of storytelling. Their descent and intervention are enacted, not by the ritual's human sponsors, but by the priest bard himself. As soon as he finishes singing of Bujang Sugi's appearance in this world, the bard briefly suspends his storytelling. Leaving his swing, he goes to where the patient reclines inside the *meligai* and there he physically re-enacts what Bujang Sugi and the gods of healing have just done by treating the patient with his medicines and charms. His role as a storyteller thus anticipates his actions as a healer, and, in the end, both roles merge, as the priest bard briefly assumes the part of the principal actors in the Sugi story he has just told. Here, by effecting this bridging, by bringing the world of Sugi and Sugi himself into the patient's world, the priest bard brings to bear not only his own skills as a healer, but also those of Keling and his upperworld guests.

Finally, the fact that Sugi, as Keling, has an autonomous narrative existence outside the ritual adds to the *Sugi sakit's* efficacy, allowing the priest bard to invoke in his story the hero's miraculous powers already well-established in the minds of his audience through their familiarity with the Orang Panggau epics.

#### HOW THE *SUGI SAKIT* HEALED

Pain and serious illness, like the process of dying itself, is, in Elaine Scarry's (1988: 29) words, "world destroying", causing the sufferer to focus all of his attention on the body as the site of his affliction, to the neglect of the larger world beyond. Hence, serious illness tends to interrupt a person's links to the external world and to the life-worlds that he or she shares with others. At the same time, pain and infirmity also tend to restrict the mobility of the body, possibly rendering it no longer capable of acting in the world. As a result, "The body, immobilized and restrained", becomes, Bruce Kapferer (1995: 139) argues,

no longer vital in the production of consciousness. It becomes the boundary of a consciousness given up to itself in virtual reverie ... that projects back into itself ... within the closure of the body. Not only does it exhaust meaning within itself, but also such a confined consciousness attacks its prison, the body itself.

Curing thus becomes a process Kapferer describes as an "intentional re-extension" of embodied awareness back into the life-worlds that the sick

person formerly shared with others (1995: 137). The narrative and staging of the *Sugi sakit* worked to produce just such a re-extension, focusing the patient's awareness outward, beyond the confines of his or her body. Everything in the Sugi narrative drew the listener into the external world and its attractions. Mountains soar into the heavens and longhouses stretch across the horizon. War boats miraculously skim over the water or even fly. The priest bard's use of hyperbole and extravagant imagery aroused the listener's interest and drew him into an idealized and seemingly timeless world of heroic adventure and romance. The story and the larger verbal drama in which it was set thus worked on the emotions of the patient and the priest bard's audience as a powerful counteragent to the constrictive, world-obliterating effects of illness, infirmity, and the process of aging.

Storytelling was central to the *Sugi sakit*. It was also critical to the ritual's emotional impact. "Emotions", as Andrew Beatty asserts, "implicate narrative, and vice versa" (2014: 558). Narratives provide the time-dimension needed for the development and playing out of emotions, while emotion-eliciting situations are the primary subject matter of narratives (see Beatty 2010). The principal hero of the Sugi story is portrayed as a miraculous healer, who is able to bring back to life even the enemies he has decapitated in battle. He and Maiden Sedinang, as Keling and Kumang, are the epitome of masculine and feminine beauty, their very perfection acting in the Sugi story as a source of healing power. Like love charms, they embody *pemandang*, the power of visibility; hence, to behold them is to be drawn to them. The effect of the Sugi story was to reawaken the listener's attachment to the living world and to the physical pleasures that made life in this world worth living. The aesthetic beauty of the story, the depth and musicality of its language, and the dramatic, vivid way in which it was performed caused listeners to "feel", or "experience love" (*asai rindu*) directly as an emotional response to what they were hearing and seeing. For the patient, the Sugi story opened his awareness to an imaginary world beyond pain, fear, or the frailties of the body, while, at the same time, it restored his connections with the past, evoking memories of youth, of courtship and love affairs, and with a possible future free of pain and bodily infirmities. The *Sugi sakit* brought about an emotional transformation in both the patient and the social community that assembled to take part in it. From an initial state of worry and grieving, the community was mobilized, motivated by feelings of compassion, and organized in a ritualized occasion of visiting, hospitality and feasting. The patient, too, was transformed. Brought into the ritual as an aging, and often gravely ill patient, he or she became, if only briefly, through identification with the heroes and heroines of the Sugi story, a young man or woman in the prime of life, a victorious warrior or a maiden being courted.



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