



## A Borneo Healing Romance: Ritual Storytelling and the Sugi Sakit, a Saribas Iban Rite of Healing, by Clifford Sather

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**A Borneo Healing Romance: Ritual Storytelling and the *Sugi Sakit*, a Saribas Iban Rite of Healing**, by Clifford Sather, Borneo Classic Text Series of Oral Literature, No. 8, Phillips, ME and Kuching, Borneo Research Council and the Tun Jugah Foundation, 2017, xvi + 559 pp., preface, illustrations, maps, diagrams, plates, appendix, glossary, bibliography, index, (paperback), ISBN: 1-929900-21-X

This book documents the *Sugi Sakit*, a healing ritual of the Saribas Iban of Sarawak in Malaysian Borneo. The ritual was first witnessed by the book's author in an Iban longhouse in the Ulu Paku in 1977. The present book, however, is based on fieldwork recordings of the ritual that were conducted in 2003 and 2004, with the collaboration and support of the Tun Jugah Foundation of Sarawak. A unique feature of the *Sugi Sakit*, which sets it apart from other Iban healing rituals, is the incorporation of the performance of a narrative romance epic: the story of Bujang Sugi (the Iban cultural hero Keling in disguise). Thus, a further aim of the book is to explore how a love and adventure story functions as an instrument of healing. The book has 559 pages, including an appendix, which lists down the principal characters and places mentioned in the *Sugi Sakit* story; a glossary of Iban terms; a bibliography; and an index.

The contents of the book are divided into four parts. The first part, which covers the background of the study, comprise four chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the *Sugi Sakit* as both a healing ritual and a performance. In this way, to the Iban, the *Sugi Sakit* is at the same time a *pengawa* ('work') and a *main* ('play', 'drama' or 'entertainment'). According to the author, in the Iban understanding, these two terms are complementary, as opposed to the Western conception, which sees them as opposites. The author further argues that 'the more compelling they (Iban rituals) are as plays, the more effective they are thought to be as work' (5). Chapter 2 provides the social and cultural settings in which *Sugi Sakit* rituals were performed by introducing the Iban, and their history and life as a people in the Saribas region, in the Betong Division of Sarawak. Additionally, Chapter 2 describes the field recording of the *Sugi Sakit* in 2003, and introduces its performer, Lemambang Renang anak Jabing, his life history and background as a priest bard (*lemambang*). In Chapter 3, the author considers the *Sugi Sakit* ritual within 'Iban notions of health, illness, and physical well-being' (39), examines the role of priest bards as healers, and reviews other healing rituals of the Iban. Meanwhile, Chapter 4 examines aspects of the poetic language (*leka main*) used in the performance of the *Sugi Sakit*. As ritual speech, the use of poetic language is crucial 'to make the *Sugi Sakit* an effective performance' (60).

The book's second part, which discusses the preliminary stages of the ritual, consists of two chapters. Chapter 5 describes the work that entails in preparing the longhouse as a 'ritual arena'. In this chapter, the preliminary events of the ritual are described in sequential order, and diagrams and photographs are used to illustrate the construction of the ritual stage (*meligai*). Chapter 6 describes the invoking and assembling of the ritual's 'unseen guests': the spirit helpers and the shaman gods (*petara manang*), by the priest bard (84).

The third and longest part of the book, which includes Chapter 7 to Chapter 19, presents the story of Bujang Sugi in various stages as performed by Lemambang Renang. Here, the Iban texts of the performance are accompanied by English translations and extensive in-text commentaries, as well as footnotes.

Compared to the previous part, the fourth part of the book comprise a single chapter (Chapter 20). In this concluding chapter, the author discusses the workings of the *Sugi Sakit* performance as a rite of healing. The *Sugi Sakit* story is again emphasised as a story of love, and following a dense discussion of the concept and role of love in the Iban society, the author argues for the power of love and community to heal. The *Sugi Sakit* ritual, as a communal event, restores the 'visibility' of the sick person in the eyes of the 'nurturing' community. Visibility, the author argues, is key in the Iban concept of love: 'love in whatever form it takes is