



BUNGO RANGE

BIODIVERSITY AND COMMUNITY

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IN THE SEARCH OF A STORY: THE TRINGGUS ORAL NARRATIVE

Yvonne M. Campbell, Jill Beon and Amanda Dickson

Introduction

The one week stay in Kupuo Tringgus was an eye-opening experience. The initial perception of the Tringgus community is that they are part of the Bau group since their village is within the vicinity of the Bau division. However, further investigation and interview with the villagers revealed that they spoke another variation that was similar to that of the Bianah, which is an area located on the other side of the Bengoh range. Even then, communication was not a problem since they too spoke the Bijagoi variation. In fact, one could say that their language is unique because there seemed to be a mixture of the Bianah and Bijagoi variation.

The main objective of our stay was to gather folktales or *dondan* from the elders of the village. However, it seemed like an impossible task because nobody seemed to remember any of the Bidayuh folktales.

We were told to go to Mr Jaim anak Saul, for the villagers felt that he is knowledgeable in telling the history of the village. We arranged to have a meeting with him and it proved fruitful because we were able to record some of the historical recount of the origin of the village. Even though we were pleased with the outcome, we still wanted some folktales.

On the third day, we finally met with an elderly lady by the name of Madam Duras. She was reluctant at first, claiming that she could not remember the stories since she had not been telling them for a long time but eventually agreed, provided that we came back in

the evening after dinner as she needed time to recall some of the stories. This is customary for most ethnic groups in Sarawak. The evenings were usually reserved for story telling in the olden days. Absence of other forms of entertainment that we have today such as television, internet, and mobile phones, made it a must to have story telling sessions after dinner.

We managed to record two folktales from Madam Duras. Fascinated by her story, we were sad that the session ended but happy that we managed to document if not all, even two folktales were sufficient, and it was a beginning.

The followings are the historical recount as told by Mr Jaim anak Saul, 49 and two folktales as told by Mdm Duras, 61.

The origin of the Tringgus community as narrated by Encik Jaim anak Saul, 49

This is a historical recount of the origin of the Tringgus community based on stories told by the narrator's grandparents and elders. Most of these recounts were passed down through oral means.

The origin of the Tringgus people are said to be from the other side of the Bengoh range which is the Bianah area. According to Mr Jaim, 49, a small group of people from the Bianah group, led by a brave man named Runggos, ventured to look for new land for farming, especially for hill paddy farming.

As this small group of people led by Runggos wandered over the Bengoh range, they met another group from the Biya' area. The two groups joined and looked for this new land together. They eventually reached the top of Gahung mountain, *Bung Gahung* which is near Sembaan (Biemban) area. They settled first by building small huts, known as *beri* (*garang* in Bijagoi) for them to stay in while planting their paddy and eventually built houses there. The people called themselves Birunggos, or 'people of Runggos', based

on the name of the person who led them here. *Bung Gahung* was considered as the first settlement of the Birunggos.

After many years, the number of villagers grew, and the land was insufficient. Once again, they decided to venture and look for more new lands to accommodate their growing community.

Now, salt was one of the important basic needs at that time but was the most difficult to find. In order to get salt, the villagers had to travel either to the present Pangkalan Batu Kitang or Pontianak, Indonesia, where the Arab and Chinese traders carry out their trading activities.

It was said that three men set off to get salt and since it took them three days on foot to reach the place, they rested by a river, which is not far from (Pang)kalan Debung. During their stay, they went to take some water from the river using a big bamboo. When they scooped up the bamboo with water in it, they found that the bamboo was filled with fish. They tried again the second time and yet again, the bamboo was filled with fish. It then came to their minds that the place was a good and prosperous one, especially to build a new village.

So, after getting their salt, they went back to Gahung and told the other villagers that the place had good soil and plenty of fish. Back then, the basic necessities such as animals including fish, paddy, and salt could be obtained here.

However, before they could set up settlement, it was the custom to seek the advice of a shaman to see whether the place had good or bad omen. They had to conduct a Gawai, give offerings and seek blessing and permission from the spirits of the ancestors, *Iyeng Sumuk Babai*. Within three days, there was no warning signs from the omen birds, no one had any dreams and therefore, it was decided that the place was safe for them to settle. The place is the present Tringgus Suduh.

Another place in which the Birunggos built up their new village and which was not far from Tringgus Suduh was Tembak. Later, they moved upward to a place which they called *Sigen Darud Beri'* (Tringgus : *sunggu Darrud Barrik*) or Valley of Beri' Mountain, which is also connected to the Bengoh range near the old Sembaan area. This move was again necessary because of the need to have new lands for farming, in particular to plant Hill paddy, which was the staple food.

Since the population had grown, they settled into two villages which were in Bung Sirandjak (where the present Tringgus hall is) and Bung Tapin. Each village had one *panggah* (the Bidayuh octagonal headhouse). The *panggah* was a symbol to indicate that there were warriors in the village to protect the people from both enemies and evil spirits. The warriors were commonly known as *Pimaggan* and in front of their names, they would use the term *Maggan*. Some warrior names which the narrator remembered were Maggan Papan, Maggan Kalos, Maggan Ngarrek and Maggan Jajah, all of which helped protected the Birunggos' villages.

Eventually, another growth of population and need for land pushed the people to look for new lands which led them to Kampung Bangun. This village, although still exist to this day, only has farms and farm huts of the people and there are no longer villagers there.

Years later, they moved from Bangun (the narrator's grandfather) to Tringgus San (three generations of the narrator now). From Bangun, they moved to Tringgus San and later to *Kupuo 'Awak* and settled in other nearby areas such as Tringgus Badad. At that time, they did not know that they were near Bau because there was no border or any indication of where they were. All was just thick jungle and land.

The Birunggos went through the hardship of the Japanese occupation and Confrontation. When the British Military Administration (BMA) came, all the villages were grouped into one resettlement which was in Tringus Suduh to make it easy for them to administer. In 1983, the villagers from Tringus Suduh were asked to move to the present villages.

Lessons for the recount

This historical recount revealed that the origin of the Tringus community is the Bianah area. Since they share the Bengoh range, it is understandable that in order to look for new places, they had to venture over the mountains within the Bengoh range. This is very obvious in terms of the language they speak, although to some extent, there is a mixture with the Jagoi variation. Although the Tringus community could understand the Jagoi variation, the Jagoi community have some difficulties in understanding them. Encik Jaim stated that the Gawai and customs of the Tringus community is very similar to those in the Bianah area, however, more research needs to be conducted on this. There may be some relation with the Bianah, in terms of kinship and blood line, however, since it has been so long, it is difficult to trace them nowadays.

It was a common practice in the olden days for new settlement and villages to be set up, members of a village moving out of their villages to look for new lands to farm and in some cases, because of the growing number of population in the village, they had to look for new settlement. Where there was fertile soil, they would build their farms and huts there and eventually, a new village. The Birungggos has an interesting history in that, they crossed over the Bengoh range. Since there was no border at the time, they were free to move all the way to Pontianak, Indonesia. In fact, when they came to the Bau-Jagoi area, they did not even know they were on Bau-Jagoi ground. To them, every where was just thick jungle.

Pangah or *Baruk* as it is known in Bau, was and is still a symbol of the Bidayuh village. Every village would have one and in the olden days, it was used as a form of a protect, a lookout place, perhaps against enemies who wanted to attack the village.

Folktales as narrated by Madam Duras, 61

***Dondan Suwob duoh Kiya'* (Burung Pungguk dan Burung Kiya', The Owl and the Kiya')**

Once, in a village on top of a mountain, lived a man with his wife and child. For years, the man has been sick due to a mysterious illness and was unable to provide for his family. Therefore, his wife had to take over, taking care of him and providing for the family as well as running the household. For years, she worked hard at their paddy field and farm to ensure that the family's needs were met.

One day, her husband said to her, "I suddenly have this craving for fish." The wife went on her way to get some fish for her husband. When she came back, her basket was full of big fishes. The husband was so happy and ate to his heart's content.

The next day, the wife once again went out and came back with her basket full of fishes. This happened for several days. Her husband became curious and asked, "How did you managed to get all these fishes? They are so huge."

"I used by *sikep*, like this," she said, showing him how she used her triangular rattan basket to scoop fish from the river.

The husband, however, was not convinced. His heart was constantly troubled and beating fast. One day, he decided to fool his wife when she went out to catch fish.

As he followed her quietly, they finally reached a river. There he saw a man standing, waiting for his wife. The man was furious that his wife was having an affair with another man. He waited until his wife has gone home and with what little strength in his fragile body, he took out his machete and hacked the man, killing him instantly. The man died and turned into a lizard (biawak). In an instant, his body dried up and all that was left were his lizard bones.

When his wife came home that evening, he was angry at her.

“Why are you angry?” asked the wife.

In his rage and anger, he answered, “How could you do this to me?” said the husband. “I have been sick for years and this is what you do?” the man took the bones of the lizard and threw them at his wife saying, “one day, you would know what it feels like to be hopeless.”

The wife, looking at the bones, cried out, “what have you done?” She took the bones home and hid them in the paddy storage.

One day, the wife was grinding paddy. Forgetting about the bones which she hid, all of the sudden, the bones fell onto the ground and was immediately pecked by the chicken. The wife at the moment had an epiphany.

From that day onwards, the wife suddenly started dressed up. The once simple wife suddenly started to dress up to attract men. She went out of the door of their house and he asked her, “where are you going?” she answered, “I am leaving you because you are no use to me. For years I have suffered taking care of you, instead of you taking care of me.”

The husband, could not say anything much except, “What can I do, this is how life is.”

An old lady, a *Nenek Kebayan*, appeared before them. She gave the man a blowpipe, *sipoot*, and then took the wife and child up a ladder made of bamboo stalks all the way to the moon. The wife and child were standing on the edge of the bamboo ladder.

“If you fall on the *kasah* mat, you will become human, if you fall off it, you will become a *suwob* (owl).’ Then she continued, “your child, if he falls on the *kasah*, he would be human but if he falls off it, would be a *kiya*’.”

The man, even in his sadness and sickness, wanted to help them but he could not hold their hands since he was weak. Both mother and child fell from the ladder and landed off the *kasah*. In an instant, the mother turned into *suwob* while the child turned into a *kiya*’.

The man, looking sadly at his wife and child said, ‘It is now up to you on how to live. You have now changed into birds and you cannot live among humans.’”

So that is why, whenever the full moon comes out, one can still hear the sound of the *suwob*, “Suuuwob, suuwob” and the sound of the *kiya*’ going “Kiyaaaa’, kiyaaaa.” , full of sadness and regret over what had happened.

Orang Kaya (Raja) Sitabur

In a Bidayuh village at the foothill of a mountain, lived two orphans with their grandmother. They were very poor and lived in a small hut at the end of the village, shunned by the villagers because of their condition. They had barely enough food to eat and the grandmother however, always ensured that the children had whatever little food they had.

One day, as the grandmother and the little children went into the village to get some food, they passed by the house of the richest man in the village, Orang Kaya Sitabur who was having drinks with some of the villagers on the *awah* of his house. When Orang Kaya

Sitabur saw the old lady and her grandchildren, dressed in rags, he laughed at them, “*Aduh!* The *orang miskin* is coming, bringing with them dirt and soil.”

When the children heard this, tears ran down their cheeks. “Don’t be sad,” said the grandmother, “let them. Let them insult us. We just have to be patient”.

One day, Orang Kaya Sitabur held a Gawai in the village. Everyone in the village came and there were many varieties of food and drinks. Everyone was enjoying themselves. Dancing with the beating of the *gendang*.

The two orphans heard the sound of the music, gongs and gendang that they became curious and went into the village to see what was happening.

Orang Kaya Sitabur then took some packets of *manah* leaves and gave them to the children, “Take this and go home to your grandmother.”

They children were so happy that they ran all the way to their house, “*Muk, Muk,*” they called out to their grandmother, “Look what we have, *Muk!*” they said, showing her the packets.

The grandmother took the packets and asked, “Where did you get this?”

“Orang Kaya Sitabur gave them to us,” they answered, still happy over their gift.

The grandmother opened the packets, but to her dismay, it was not full of rice but full of *abuh*, ashes from the fireplace.

“*Tui! Turah!*” the grandmother exclaimed. “How dare he treat us like this?” the children’s eyes were filled with tears. “Do not worry my grandchildren, I will make him pay.”

The grandmother picked up a cat who was sitting under their hut. She took some cloth and rags and dressed up the cat. She told the children to bring the cat to the village, all dolled up. The children went to the village and when the cat heard the noise, it jumped from the children's arms and ran around in panic.

As soon as the villagers saw the cat, in their state of drunkenness, they howled and laughed to their hearts' content. They found the cat's action and attire to be comical. Laughing and pointing at the cat.

Suddenly, the sky became dark as though as something ate up the sun, covering it from showing its' light. There was thunder and lightening filling the sky one after another. The children ran towards their hut. Their grandmother was already waiting for her grandchildren with a *sikep* in her hand.

"Come quick," she motioned to her grandchildren. They ran towards her and they all hid under the *sikep*.

After a while, the dark skies parted, and the sun was shining again. As the sun came out, everything was very quiet. They went towards the village and saw that everyone had turned into stone. There were those who were lying down, those who were standing and those who were walking, all stopped in their tracks and became stones. Even the Orang Kaya Sitabur turned into a stone.

And all of this was because they have not only mocked and laughed at the two poor orphans and their grandmother but also because they laughed at a cat, which shows their disrespect to all living things.

Lessons from the folktales

Like any folktales, these two folktales contain some moral lesson and values which are deemed important by the Bidayuh community, in this case, the people of Tringgus. The main lesson to be learnt is that respect is an important value among the Bidayuh and respect here refers to respecting not only humans but also nature in general. In the case of the cat in the *Dondan Raja Sitabur*.

Another important lesson is that, different people have different luck. No two people would have the same luck in life, therefore, it is only right to accept that person and not judge them. This lesson can be seen in both folktales.

Animal is an important element in both stories. They are connected to the spiritual world and seemed to have some impact on the Bidayuh community. For instance in *Dondan Suwob duoh Kiya'*, the wife and child turned into the owl and the *kiya'*, the wife had an affair with a man who transformed into a lizard and in the second *dondan*, the consequences of laughing at a cat turned the entire village into stone. All these indicate how significant animals are in the Bidayuh community. This could be related to the Bidayuh worldview in which (1) they believe that there are spirits in the environment, around them, (2) these spirits influence their lives both directly and indirectly and (3) there needs to be a balance between all things, human and animals, human and nature as well as human and spirits.

Conclusion

Most oral narratives such as historical recount and folktales are lost nowadays. Our experience showed how difficult it was to get these narratives. We were lucky to have found Encik Jaim and Madam Duras, however, if nothing is done to preserve these narratives, they would be lost forever. The younger generations that we spoke to did not even know any of these folktales.

Within these narratives, they are embedded with rich cultural knowledge – morals, values, beliefs, history, and customs about a particular cultural community, in this case the Tringgus community. Together with the loss of these narratives would be the loss of the valuable cultural knowledge which reflects and carries with it the identity of the community.