

## NOTES:

1. Cf. Nicole Revel-Macdonald (1983, for a review see AFS vol. XLIV, 1985: 132-134). Also, see *Kinaadman* [(Wisdom), since 1979], which published some of the most recently discovered folk narratives in Mindanao.

2. Cf. *Maharadia Lawana* which when it was brought into the light of literature studies, carried with it a presentation of the geographic setting in which it was found (Francisco 1969: 5-8).

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## SARAWAK

RUBENSTEIN, CAROL. *The Honey Tree Song: Poems and Chants of Sarawak Dayaks*. Athens / Ohio and London: Ohio University Press, 1985. Xxiv+380 pages. Illustrations, map. Hardcover US\$36.95. ISBN 0-8214-0413-X.

This publication is the second to arise from a survey of oral literature in Sarawak. How the survey came about is explained in the introduction. Carol Rubenstein had always, she tells us, written poetry. In the early 1970's she set out to travel in Southeast Asia, notebook in hand. She was distressed by the "mad materialism" of Hong Kong, and by Saigon, "city of death," and so she set out for Borneo which she thought "far from the corruptions of the modern world." There she had the idea of studying the poetry of interior folk. She approached the staff of the Sarawak Museum, the main locus of research in the state, and convinced them that the project was feasible despite the great diversity of languages involved, and her own lack of training in linguistics or anthropology. With their help, she obtained funding from the Ford Foundation. The Museum provided strings of guides and translators, allowing her to make brief collecting trips to different parts of Sarawak, and to work over her tapes at the Museum in Kuching.

The results of this research were first published by the Sarawak Museum as a two-volume special issue of their *Journal* (Rubenstein 1973). It contains a remarkable two hundred and twenty six items, totalling over a thousand pages of texts from at least a

dozen different languages. The ethnic groups that are best represented are the Bidayuh with sixty-six items, the Kelabit with forty-two, and the Iban with thirty-two. Other groups are less well represented. There is nothing in the literature on Borneo to compare with this in sheer volume and scope. Nor is there ever likely to be, first because these oral traditions are sadly not at all removed from the "corruptions of the modern world," and second because a professional linguist would probably feel qualms about working in more than one or two languages at most. So much of what we would like to know about the cultures of interior Borneo, about what makes them special and intriguing, we will now never learn. In this context, the value of Rubenstein's work is clear. She may be justly proud of preserving some part of a precious and fragile tradition.

That said, one must point out that there are problems with the presentation. There are the obvious difficulties of rendering the subtleties of poetic expression in an unstudied language by using intermediary translators. Rubenstein describes the process as hectic: "We often went through several languages and dialects—the archaic or special song language; the modern colloquial dialect of that region; the dialect of another region; Malay; variations within English; and back the whole way for each question." Sensibly, she concentrated on word-by-word glosses, a procedure that may produce stilted or opaque prose, but at least limits the flights of fancy of the non-indigenous translators. Unfortunately, however, these glosses are not provided in the presentation. Instead, there is a column of text on one page, rendered roughly phonetically, and a column of English translation on the facing page, presumably matched line-for-line. But no glosses of words, so that the use that a linguist can make of the texts is limited, and the primary data so painfully collected is lost. There is little attempt to distinguish genres within a particular culture, so that one is hard put to tell sacred texts from ephemeral jingles. The introductions to the sections, arranged by major ethnic cohesion, are superficial.

*The Honey Tree Song* is a second presentation of the material, evidently intended for a more casual audience. It contains only about half the items in the first version, and completely lacks the texts in the several original languages. It is organized under a number of ad hoc categories, some straightforward ("Hunting and Gathering"), others obtuse ("Festivals, Greetings, Remarks in Passing, and Farewells"). This makes it hard to sort out which ethnic group particular items come from, let alone which genre. It is still engaging to leaf through the translations, some hard to grasp, some delightfully transparent. But the serious reader would do well to consult the first publication, which, despite its technical limitations, is still a unique achievement.

REFERENCE CITED:

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