Clifford Sather, *A Borneo Healing Romance: Ritual Storytelling and the Sugi Sakit, A Saribas Iban Rite of Healing*, [Borneo classic text series of oral literature 8], USA: Borneo Research Council Inc. and The Tun Jugah Foundation, 2017, xvi + 559 pp. ISBN 192990021X, price: MYR 120.00 (paperback).

Clifford Sather's monograph is comprised of rich knowledge and theories of oral narrative traditions, accommodating both local and academic terms that can be used as a significant reference in scholarly debates on oral traditions. It provides important historical and cultural documentation of Iban communities in Saribas in the Malaysian state of Sarawak. The author focuses on *Sugi Sakit*, an Iban healing ritual during which love stories and other romance narratives are sung by a healer in order to cure an ill person. Because virtually no one today practices this tradition, this book represents an important documentation of *Sugi Sakit* ritual knowledge.

A Borneo Healing Romance poses several interesting questions, one of the most intriguing of which is: 'how *Sugi Sakit* worked as a rite of healing' (p. 12). This question in particular guides me to understand this book. After first visiting the Saribas of Sarawak in 1976, the author began his fieldwork in 1977. His anthropological fieldwork consisted of living in a Saribas longhouse with his family for roughly three months per year from 1977 to 1979, carrying out in-depth interviews with Iban people on their rituals. He then revisited the same locations in Sarawak in 1983, 1991, 1993–1994 and 2003.

The book explores ritual healing, storytelling, performance, oral tradition and shamanism with a focus on the ritual of *Sugi Sakit*. To contextualize *Sugi Sakit* and provide a subtle, in-depth understanding of the practice, Chapter 3 calls attention to co-existing healing rituals aimed at curing the human body and strengthening the mental health of ill persons. Sather's presentation of the rituals contains a detailed analysis of the words sung and verbalized, providing the reader, as well as people of Iban communities, with a fascinating portrait of the richness and diversity of Saribas rituals. These thick descriptions left me with one question. The author did not elaborate on possible differences between male and female healers involved in the rite of *Sugi Sakit* healing, categorizing both as 'priest bards'. One would gather that healers and ritual masters are mostly male, as the author mentions fewer female than male healers, but the gender dynamic was left unexplored.

As the author explains, lay therapies are simple treatments of human illness conducted by Iban people, including shamans who have knowledge of traditional medical treatments. Iban people with traditional medicinal knowledge treat an ill person's body by applying massage and treating outwardly visible

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physical conditions. In other words, healers fix the physical body of ill persons, curing it as 'an object of treatment'. If this method provides no effective healing, a ritual specialist is required to perform special healing rituals combined with offerings, persuading the spirits, gods, and ancestors to cure invisible damage to unseen components of the human body. In doing so, shamans treat the human soul in order to forge a good interrelationship with gods, natural spirits, and ancestral spirits. At this stage, healing functions as 'a work of enticement' to attract spirits and gods. Offerings and ritual processes are performed meticulously in order to attract and seduce these supernatural beings to heal invisible damage or even the soul of an ill person.

The author characterizes *Sugi Sakit* as a rite of healing interwoven with a narrative epic containing what is essentially a love story performed by priest-bards. The priest-bard's task is to perform the singing of this love story and other narrative romances, transforming it from 'mere entertainment' into an essential part of *Sugi Sakit* healing. "The *Sugi Sakit* thus takes as its point of departure the twin enticements of prayers and offerings. Going beyond this, the priest bard adds his 'voice' and through his voice he creates a 'drama' (main) that invokes the direct intervention of gods and spirits [to treat the sick person]" (p. 47). This stage of healing is 'an enactment', taking the verbal form of a ritual drama to the healing medium. If sung correctly, this narrative singing has a compelling power to heal the mental, emotional, and psychological conditions of the ill person.

The ritual words are an allegory. For this reason, shamans and priest-bards need to articulate properly these ritual words in the process of ritual healing. The healing power relies on the proper recollection and repetition of these verbalized words. Human memory plays an important role in ensuring that the words are sung in their appropriate order and articulated in the proper composition. In addition to traditional and modern medical treatments, ritual words and song lyrics have been a constant part of the healing repertoire available to Iban communities.

During the author's fieldwork, songs and narratives were recorded. The author argues convincingly that the melody of the sung stories performed during *Sugi Sakit* is essential for the efficacy of curing particular illnesses. Unfortunately for readers (and would-be listeners), the book does not provide a compact disc of recorded ritual songs, nor does it utilize other means of electronic publication such as YouTube. To readers who are not familiar with the styles of singing discussed in this book, it is therefore hard to distinguish one style from another by only relying on the author's explanation and description. The reader simply learns that the performance of *Sugi Sakit* is connected with the lyrics of a love story or romance narrative sung melodiously during the healing

ritual. To sing a ritual love song of considerable duration, the power of healing relies on a combination of the song's words (voice) as well as its rhythm and melody. Sather writes that 'the rhythm of Iban *leka main*, including that of *Sugi* narrative, is dependent upon the rhythm inherent in Iban oral poetry generally' (p. 64). Therefore, supplying this publication with samples of songs in different singing styles could have provided us with a better understanding of the performance of the *Sugi Sakit* ritual. It would have also benefitted young Iban people interested in studying their ancestral rituals.

A Borneo Healing Romance provides a picture of the cosmological connection linking the Iban and their spiritual world, including their ancestors and gods. To build harmonious relationships between them, the Iban communities perform different rituals. Curing particular illnesses through rituals is a way to safeguard these connections between the community and their ancestors and spiritual world. Shamans, priest-bards, and other ritual practitioners with great skill and knowledge of rituals are indispensable to maintain this fast disappearing cultural heritage. These forms of knowledge and their performance are interdependent cultural dynamics.

For those interested in ritual storytelling and related traditions, this book offers a great example of describing and documenting oral traditions, showing how unwritten rituals serve to restore the visibility and harmonious relationship between the Iban communities and their external and spiritual world. For the Saribas Iban communities, this book is an indispensable documentary of a cultural heritage fading away. Today's generation can benefit from it, as it documents their inherited values and ways of life.

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