Comments on the performance of Si Buah Mburle

The story of *Si Buah Mburle* which we recorded in 1979 is a unique text, composed during a performance to suit our expectations as perceived by Sonang Sitakar and those who had invited him. At the request of the cultural officer M.R. Solin the storyteller explains a little about his life before he begins the storytelling. He mentions some special circumstances during his birth, how his name was changed from Sempa into Sonang because he was a sickly child, and how he has experienced poverty. He also declares that he has never been able to go to school and has not received any official form of education – he has learned to tell stories by listening to others. The storyteller ends the performance by expressing the wish that his tale may please God and be useful to teach other people in foreign countries, as well as the Pakpak-Dairi listeners.

Although he arrives in the morning, the storyteller says that his performance is (part of) a *malam kesenian*, a modern Indonesian expression for a cultural evening. He also explains that the story he has selected is typical for Pakpak-Dairi culture and also educational, it is ‘full of teaching and different kinds of advice’. As he considers us as people who respect Pakpak-Dairi culture, the *sukut-sukuten* is performed in the traditional manner: before telling the story, the storyteller addresses the ancestral spirits to ask permission (*mersintabin*).

The performance of the *sukut-sukuten Si Buah Mburle* alternates between spoken narration in which the storyteller interacts with some people in the audience who support him as *pengue*, and chanting or singing of songs, usually with closed eyes, in which there is no such interaction. There are two main chanting styles: stylized weeping or laments (*tangis*) for the main female character, and loud chanting (*odong-odong*) for the
main male character. While the sections of storytelling usually last much longer than the chanting, these chanted passages occur quite frequently and take approximately one third of the performance time.

**SPoken Sections**

The spoken sections contain, besides the narrative, comments on the happenings described in the narrative and explain poetic expressions used in the chanted texts. Influenced by questions and remarks of the *pengue*, they are more than a straightforward monologue. As in any informal conversation, some passages seem confused when heard out of context, because the speaker may leave a line unfinished, or suddenly change the topic when he is interrupted or distracted. Still, the spoken parts of the performance are most similar to the written prose texts in Van der Tuuk’s manuscripts, with which they share the following features.

1. In the spoken passages narrative frequently alternates with direct speech, as in the very beginning of the story:

   ‘So go [there] first, to see if it is true or not,’ said the *puhan*’s wife. His name was Perubak Bolon. So he really went and found his brother-in-law (*silih*) Si Haji. ‘Oh, *silih*, you have come,’ said his brother-in-law Si Haji [standing] on top of the wall, because formerly the villages were surrounded by a wall.

While the use of direct speech makes the narrative more lively, if the speaker is not mentioned (as is often the case), it may cause confusion or even misinterpretation. Sometimes the *pengue* make a remark or pose a question in order to clarify who is speaking.

2. Long spoken sections use what Voorhoeve characterized as ‘a rather monotonous ‘and then’ style’, which is common in daily conversation. A new passage is usually marked by a fixed word or expression, the most frequent of which is the word ‘*jadi*’ or ‘*jadi bagi mo*’. As in written texts,

---

1 The word chant here refers to an oral form ‘intermediate between speech and song’, similar to David Goldsworthy’s use (1978:34) of this word in his article on honey-collecting songs in the Malay East coast area of North Sumatra.