

# **World Oral Literature Project** voices of vanishing worlds

## Occasional Paper 2



## The Sabah Oral Literature Project

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Cover design by Dora Kemp and Mark Turin.

The cover photo was taken by George N. Appell, Ph.D., during his first period of fieldwork among the Rungus, a Dusunic speaking people, of Sabah, Malaysia (1959-1963). The picture depicts the *moginum*, a renewal ceremony for the domestic family unit in the longhouse. The priestess, *bobolizan*, is in a trance dance, leading to the sacrifice of the pig at her feet.

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# Preface

The World Oral Literature Project is an urgent global initiative to document and make accessible endangered oral literatures before they disappear without record. The project was established in early 2009 to support scholars and community researchers engaged in the collection and preservation of all forms of oral literature by funding original fieldwork, and by providing training in digital collection and archiving methods.

Through this series of Occasional Papers, the World Oral Literature Project is supporting the publication of research findings and methodological considerations that relate to scholarship on oral literature. Hosted for free on our website for immediate distribution, the series allows researchers to disseminate fieldwork findings and analyses through a streamlined, peer-review process. We welcome expressions of interest from any scholar seeking to publish original and timely work.

I am delighted that our second Occasional Paper is a discussion of the genesis and progress of the Sabah Oral Literature Project, written by its founder, George N. Appell. Dr Appell is a social anthropologist, who, together with his wife Laura W.R. Appell, has been working with the Rungus of Sabah since 1959 as well as among the Bulusu' of Indonesian Borneo and the Dogrib Indians of the Northwest Territories of Canada. The Appells' enduring commitment to the documentation and collection of endangered oral literature continues to inspire younger generations of scholars, and their vision for the World Oral Literature Project as a lasting centre for the appreciation of such oral art was instrumental in its establishment.

*Dr Mark Turin  
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September 2010*

# The Sabah oral literature project

George N. Appell, Ph.D.

*Only by knowing how other peoples in other times, other places, and other cultures have experienced and interpreted the human condition can we truly understand what it means to be human and our place in the universe.*

## Prologue

The Sabah Oral Literature Project was established in 1986 by my wife Laura and myself in response to the significant changes in Rungus society that had occurred since our original research. The Rungus are a Dusunic-speaking people of the Kudat District of Sabah, Malaysia. We had conducted our original research among the Rungus from 1959 to 1963. At the time of our original research, the Rungus were longhouse dwelling, swidden agriculturalists practicing their traditional religion. They cultivated hill rice, maize and cassava as well as raising pigs, chickens and water buffalo. The Rungus were the most traditional Dusunic speakers in all of Sabah. During this period of field research, I focused on the social structure of the Rungus, their language and their swidden economy, while Laura focused on their language and religion.

As the traditional religion and language of the Rungus were exceedingly complex, we had always planned to return to them to continue our study after I had completed my Ph.D. dissertation. However, by 1966 the new Chief Minister of Sabah had prohibited all anthropological research. We tried to return for a short visit in 1980, but we were turned away at the airport. I had been declared *persona non grata*.

In 1985, I met Datuk Joseph Pairin Kitingan at a conference in Boston and told him of our plight. He assured me that when he became Chief

Minister he would have my status as *persona non grata* removed. In 1986, we returned to the Rungus to continue our study of their language and religion. But much to our surprise, in the 23 years during which we were prevented from being in contact with the Rungus, their society had undergone such major changes that our plans for research had to be revised.

Christianity had largely replaced the original religion. One of the major genres of oral literature had been the religious performance for illness, for success in agricultural activities and for the fecundity of the village and individual families. Whereas these performances had previously been performed by priestesses who were also spirit mediums, by 1986 these ritual ceremonies were seldom held.

In the past, when there had been a death, friends and neighbours would come and spend the night sitting with the body of the deceased, retelling myths and legends to keep people awake and to hold the predatory spirits at bay. This was now seldom practised.

The old *adat* (customary law) of marriage had largely disappeared. Where before Rungus culture had stated that extramarital sexual relations were prohibited, there were now unmarried women with children and some Rungus women had become prostitutes. In 1987, one headman asked if he could see our data on the old *adat* of marriage and weddings as he could not remember what the rules were.

The Rungus language was also being rapidly eroded and lost. In some families, preschool children were now spoken to in Malay in order that they be prepared for their schooling. Most of the young men and women had by now received a primary education and many had some experience of secondary education.

However, there were older people who still remembered the oral literature that accompanied major ceremonies. They could recite this beautiful, moving and complex poetry. They could still describe how sacrifices were made and the ritual that followed. They remembered many of the old myths, legends and historical narratives. Consequently, to retrieve as much as possible of the traditional Rungus language and culture, our research turned towards recording this oral literature.

### The traditional oral literature of the Rungus and related ethnic groups

Every society in its own unique way responds to the challenges of the human spirit through oral literature in its various forms. This literature arises from universal creative impulses as refracted through a particular culture. By it, the meaning of life is organized, the uses of the environment and how to live in it is explained, the causes of human suffering are justified and its mitigation suggested, the spirit world is populated and its relationship to humans detailed, the reasons for social injustice are argued, warfare and its reasons are glorified, how the nature of love, beauty and companionship is experienced, as well as how one is to be in the world. Oral literature has great aesthetic value, resonating with all of us, as it deals with the universal challenges of the human spirit.

The traditional oral literature of the Rungus and related Dusunic speakers has developed over long periods of time to interpret and explain the human condition as viewed through their cultural window, to symbolize their experience

with the environment, and make sense of their place in history. Such literature gives us insight into the human condition during those times in human history when small communities existed on subsistence agriculture and came into conflict with other such societies.

Among the Rungus there exists a vast inventory of poetry, prayers, songs, hymns and word pictures of the life that they have led, their relation with the absolute and their relations with each other. This accumulation of oral literature, winnowed through the ages, is exquisite in its beauty and in its depth of wisdom. It provides a unique portrait of life as lived in a different time and place by individuals who share the human spirit with us. It encodes the basic cultural themes, values and propositions of this society, and it contains the creative voice of the people. This volatile library of profound aesthetic value will shortly disappear resulting in a great loss to the world of literature and knowledge of cultural data and art forms. There was, and still is, considerable urgency in collecting as much of the traditional oral literature as possible to develop a comprehensive understanding of the Rungus way of life and to prevent this well-developed linguistic art from being lost forever. These concerns led us to the creation of the Sabah Oral Literature Project to collect not only the oral literature of the Rungus but also that of other related Dusunic speakers in the Kudat District.

The oral literature of the Rungus is their major form of artistic expression and contains a number of genres, which are outlined below.

#### Ritual texts – *rina'it*

Among the Rungus and related ethnolinguistic groups throughout the Kudat District, there exists a chanted form of poetry known as *rina'it*. We focus on the Rungus forms here, as our collection of the Rungus oral literature is the most complete. *Rina'it* derives from the stem */ra'it/* 'to speak', and may be translated as 'that which was

spoken'. These chanted poems are performed in order to petition the various gods and spirits for help. They tell of the work of gods and demigods, and describe the nature of the spirits who, if offended, can cause illness. The ritual chants are accompanied by the sacrifice of a pig to the spirits who cause such illness by taking and torturing the souls of individuals. Thus, during ceremonies, these spirits are implored to return the souls. Other texts are used in marriage ceremonies to sanctify the marriage and prevent the ill effects from a possible incestuous union. In various forms these chants are also used to renew the vitality of the domestic family and to increase its success in accumulating items of wealth such as gongs, jars and brassware. Other texts are used to renew the fertility of the village, as it is perceived to decline over time after a ceremony.

These poetic chants are lengthy and are chanted by priestesses. Priestesses, first as spirit mediums in trance, discern which of the various spirits are the source of trouble. This then determines which of the poetic chants is to be used.

The poems are formed in couplets. The first line is in the standard vocabulary, and the second line, reiterating the first, is in a ritual lexicon. For example:

<i>Interlinear Translation</i>	<i>Free Translation</i>
<b>Sizong kad Morolongoi'</b> <b>Gongo kad Morologung</b>	In a voice like the clear note of the nose flute spoke
Flute note speaks Morolongoi	Murmuring Water, with musical
Flute note speaks Morologung	tones spoke Falling Water.
<b>Asi ku di kiaka</b> <b>Ara ku di kiudung</b>	My salutations, older sibling, my greetings to elder brother.
Salute my to older sibling Greetings my to elder brother	

1 'Sizong' sounds like the first clear note of a Rungus nose flute. In Rungus epic poetry, it indicates the opening up of a conversation with a pleasing, refined voice by a principal character, god or spirit. *Morolongoi* is the name of a dangerous water spirit, and *Morologung* is her ritual name. These are onomatopoeic lexemes referring to the sound of soughing or lapping water and the sound of falling water respectively.

As Fox (1971, 1988, 2005) points out, while this form of semantic parallelism is common in Austronesian languages, the cultural content of such texts reflect only the specific culture in which they were created.<sup>2</sup>

In a Rungus ceremony a ritual text may take up to three days to perform, with sections that are sung in chorus by female attendants in a beautiful melody. These melodies of the chants are also frequently played on the Rungus nose flute. To experience a performance of these ritual texts can be extraordinarily moving.

How are such texts memorized and passed on to the next generation of priestesses and spirit mediums? This problem of continuity in oral literature was first addressed by Milman Parry in his study of Yugoslavian epic poetry. He developed the idea of the formulaic character of phrases and lines in oral literature. He compared the forms of formulaic phrases and lines found in these Yugoslav texts to those found in Homeric Epics, and concluded that Homeric Epics were not composed as written texts in the manner that we know them today, but originally arose as oral literature. This conclusion was developed and refined by Albert Lord in his studies of oral literature. In essence, the formula refers to a 'group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea' (Stolz and Shannon 1976: ix). Examples of these are: 'Achilles swift of foot,' or 'Hector of the flashing helmet,' but there are other forms as well, such as the repetition of whole sequences of lines (Lloyd-Jones 1992: 52).

Rungus sacred texts also exhibit a formulaic manner of presentation. To indicate the power

2 The form of parallelism found in Rungus texts, and also in many of the texts of other Dusunic speakers, is not found among all groups of Austronesian speakers in Borneo. For example, the texts of the Iban of Sarawak, according to Sather (2001) and Masing (1997), do not exhibit such parallelism. In his study of the texts of the Berawan, also of Sarawak, Metcalf (1989) reports that while there is a certain amount of parallelism, its form is much less formal and less rigid in the coupling of semantic elements. Parallelism occurs in the coupling of words, not lines, and the performer has the opportunity to improvise on the text.

and speed of gods, for example, the formulaic phrase 'he followed the trail of the rainbow and rode on the tail of the wind' is used. The couplets in the ritual poetry with the first line in the standard language and the second line amplifying the first in the same meter but with an esoteric, ritual lexicon is another method by which memorization is enhanced. This is similar to that which has been reported for the Berawan in Sarawak by Metcalf (1989), and to forms found in Sulawesi and Eastern Indonesia (Fox 1988).

An interesting aspect of the ritual lexicon is that it contains lexemes that are part of the standard lexicon of other languages spoken in Borneo. For example, in Rungus, the longhouse apartment is known as *ongkob*. In the Rungus ritual language, however, it is *lamin*, which is the standard term for longhouse apartment among the Bulusu', who live far way in Kalimantan Timur up river from Tarakan. In 1980 and 1981, we worked with the Bulusu' after we were excluded from visiting the Rungus. Other Rungus ritual terms that we found to be part of the standard lexicon of the Bulusu' are:

English	Standard Rungus	Ritual Rungus	Standard Bulusu'
soul	<i>hatod</i>	<i>lingu</i>	<i>lingu</i>
water	<i>va'ig</i>	<i>timog</i>	<i>timog</i>
rice	<i>parai</i>	<i>bilod</i>	<i>bilod</i>
maiden	<i>modsuni</i>	<i>samandak</i>	<i>samandak</i>

The explanation for the existence of such lexemes in a ritual register from distant ethnic groups only remotely related to the Rungus remains far from clear. Yet, the phonology, morphology and syntax of this ritual register are identical to that of the standard Rungus language.

### Other genres of oral literature

In addition, there exist prayers and exhortations that accompany sacrifices to the rice spirits to bring them to the fields at planting time and to send them safely home after the harvest. There

are long prayers and sacrifices to appease the spirits that can destroy one's fields and plantings, such as mice, birds and rust. Such prayers are in the form of narratives telling of the work of various agricultural gods and spirits who protect the fields, and they seldom have the poetic formula of the *rina'it*.

There are also historical narratives. These tell of Rungus life and the human condition, of warfare and relations between various groups before the arrival of the British. These also tell of the arrival of the British and how they established their rule. These are particularly interesting and important for the history of Sabah, as they include salient information and details about leading historical figures, both before and after the arrival of the British.

Furthermore, there are narratives about tragedies and conflicts in the human condition and about the achievements of individuals in overcoming obstacles. Then there are the myths and legends that tell how the world was formed, how it was populated, and how it came to be as it is. This includes stories of a primordial flood, how it came about and who survived. These myths and legends also explain how the landscape came into being and those topographical features that are symbolically significant, many with religious connotations. I can remember one old woman pleading with me in 1962 to go to the British to ask them not to destroy the stone figurines of the hunter and his prey that had been overcome by the flood. The road contractors did not recognize these figures when they started to build roads in the Kudat District, and of course they were subsequently destroyed. These figurines would likely have been important tourist sights had they not been destroyed.

### Philosophy of the Sabah Oral Literature Project

The philosophy behind establishing the Sabah Oral Literature Project was to encourage and



train local personnel to collect and preserve the oral traditions of their own community.

The project was also designed to provide a model for the rapid collection and preservation of the oral literatures of other regions of Sabah and other areas of the world. We hoped that this project would demonstrate to local people how they can move rapidly to collect and preserve their oral heritage before it is lost.

In addition to the preservation of such important oral literature, there are certain theoretical questions on the development of oral literatures in general that we brought to the collection. What are the processes used to preserve oral literatures, how are they memorized, how are they passed on from generation to generation, and how are creative modifications made? To answer these questions, we aimed to make recordings of the same text performed by the same priestess at different times, with several years intervening, and we sought out priestesses from different villages in order to record the same texts. This gives us some idea of the variance between priestesses' performances and the content of texts.

### Organization of the project

It was clear that my wife and I, given our limited time in the field, could not complete the work of collecting the vast body of oral literature from the various Rungus villages ourselves, let alone the related ethnic groups. Moreover, a local team would do a better job of recording since they would know the best sources for oral literature. In addition, a local team would also have access to certain texts that would not be available to outsiders because they accompanied rituals that the government had forbidden.

Therefore, during our frequent visits to the Rungus, we trained a local team to collect oral literature. We also collected a number of texts ourselves as part of the training. Through trial and error, the composition of our team evolved to comprise:

- 1) A man who would oversee the project and communicate with us as to its progress. This person also held a permanent job as a government employee.
- 2) A young man who was familiar with recording equipment who would do the actual recording of texts. He also would be the transcriber of the recorded texts.
- 3) One or two elders to accompany the individual doing the recording. These elders provide leads to those who controlled the major ritual texts, and also listen to the recordings of the texts to ensure that the reciter did not leave out important sections. Some priestesses thought that omitting some verses would prevent the ritual text from losing its power.

A young man was crucial for the recording and transcribing, as women would not travel from village to village as was clearly necessary at that time. Second, we needed a man who had some primary education. Older men had none and had settled into their own yearly agricultural cycle to support their families.

Four times over the twenty-five years of this project we have brought different members of the team to our offices in the United States to give them further training. They in turn have helped us with our Rungus Cultural Dictionary. We found this procedure to be extremely productive in that here in our office, there were few distractions to interfere with deep enquiries into certain subjects. It took several years of hiring different people to work in the team to determine who would stay with it and do the best job. By the mid 1990s the team had solidified to its current members.

### Field recording of ritual texts and other narratives

Talented and well-known priestesses and older men known for their story telling powers were,

and are, sought out. The ritual chants and hymns telling of the work of the gods and the spirits, the *rina'it*, are particularly beautiful and moving. During these, the priestess, while in trance, approaches the various spirits that have caused illness and negotiates with them to return the souls of the ill to their bodies.

At the beginning of the Sabah Oral Literature Project, when ceremonies with such ritual texts were being performed, we made recordings of actual performances to cure illness or renew the domestic family's goodwill with the gods and spirits. These recordings included the priestess going into trance in order to communicate with the spirits. While these are important texts, they were found to be hard to transcribe because of the typical noises of a longhouse: chickens cackling, hogs grunting, children yelling, gongs playing, etc. Also, the priestess would, on occasion, have helpers taking a section of the ritual to chant while the major priestess continued with another section simultaneously. Furthermore, the priestess would frequently mumble her ritual text. Consequently, recordings of these ritual chants without the singing were then made in an isolated location in the same manner used by a priestess to train an initiate.

This last procedure continues to be our method, and the recording of ceremonies has ceased as in the last decade these performances have all but died out. The drawback of this procedure is that the music of the chants is not recorded. Furthermore, it is forbidden for the priestess to chant these texts when there is no ritual sacrifice, as this would bring the very spirits that steal souls and cause illness without an offering, which would anger them. Therefore, as this music is also performed on nose flutes and native guitars, we have recorded the various musical forms that accompany each ritual text on these instruments.

But even this procedure of recording the priestess reciting the ritual text without singing it has had its difficulties. Several ritual texts were considered to be so potent that the priestesses

would only agree to be recorded in the recently built church.

The recording of other texts, such as historical narratives, myths, legends, stories, etc., presents no such problems. Furthermore, we have not had to expend much effort locating those who knew the best versions. These came from men who would present themselves to our recording team to be recorded once the project became well known.

### Equipment used

Until recently, oral texts were recorded with a Sony Pro Walkman portable cassette tape recorder with a Shure Dynamic microphone and Type II 60 or 90 minute cassettes.

As there are still villages without power, a battery-powered recorder is necessary. We found that the Sony Walkman, being rather small, was easy to carry on footpaths to the various villages. It was rugged enough to withstand the rough handling that it received as well as withstanding the high humidity and temperatures. We have had to replace only two such machines since we began recording in 1986.

A Sony cassette transcriber is used for transcription of the texts. This is a machine of the type used in offices for transcribing dictation. It has a foot pedal that permits the operator to rewind the tape to review the text. This, however, requires electric power, so in the beginning all transcriptions were made at the district headquarters, an hour and a half away by bus, where electricity was available.

In the last two years, we have been using an Olympus LS-10 Linear PCM recorder with an additional external microphone that can be placed near the individual being recorded. The MP3 recordings are then downloaded onto a computer for transcription. To aid transcription, we use the 3-pedal Start-Stop Universal Transcription System with a USB interface. This permits the transcriber to move back and forth

two or three lexemes at a time to review the recording. Recordings are then returned to our office as audio CDs.

The collection team also keeps a field journal in which they list the tape number, where the recordings are made, the type of text, who is narrating and the ethnic group of the narrator. This is then collated with the catalogue of oral literature that has been collected.

### Payment to performers

No payment is made for recording myths, legends, historical narratives, word play, songs, life histories, etc. However, texts that include ritual chants and hymns (*rina'it*) require payment for the priestess to perform them or to teach them to the next generation of aspiring spirit mediums. These payments usually include ritual items that shield the priestess from harm. In addition, we have generally paid these priestesses with traditional Venetian beads, purchased in the United States, which were highly valued by Rungus women. But some priestesses wanted a small payment of cash in addition to beads.

### Archiving the recordings

All original tape recordings of oral texts are returned to our office in the United States. These are marked with a red strip and archived in a fireproof filing cabinet. They are then copied in two ways: first to a second audiocassette tape (marked with a green strip) and then to audio CD. The second audiocassette is returned to the field team for transcription. Original tapes are not used for transcription because they can be stretched or torn by the transcription machine. The audio CDs are duplicated and stored in two different buildings to prevent catastrophic loss.

Recordings were originally archived only on audio CD, but as all recordings degrade over time, these audio CDs are now being converted

to MP3 format and copied on to two separate hard drives for storage in different locations.

It has been impossible to archive any of the oral literature collection in Sabah itself. There are no archives there that are presently capable of giving these recordings proper treatment given the heat and humidity. In the Rungus area, there is still no interest in archiving such materials, nor are there facilities to do so.

### Transcribing the tape or digital recordings

Transcription of the texts could not take place until a phonemic alphabet had been devised. This we undertook during our original fieldwork, devising modifications as we worked with the oral literature team. The symbols used were selected and tested to ensure that they fit with the orthography to which the Rungus were becoming accustomed from the Malay language, the official language of the country. However, certain Rungus phonemes did not occur or were not recognized in the Malay language, in particular the glottal stop. While in the Philippines, the glottal stop is rendered as /q/, in Borneo it has been rendered as an apostrophe, and we continue to use this symbol, believing that the /q/ would be harder for the Rungus to interpret.

While transcriptions of the texts were originally returned to our office by airmail, now they are sent by email. These are then entered into our catalogue and are duplicated so that they can be filed in two separate locations.

### Cataloguing the recorded texts

The collected ritual texts are catalogued primarily according to the social entity to which they pertain as charters (see Nos. 1–5 below). These texts are used to ensure protection of the social entity from ritual danger, to manage transitions of status, to relieve suffering among the members of the social entity or to enhance its fecundity.

These are critical for defining the social characteristics of the entity.

Then there are texts that do not pertain to any particular social entity but are catalogued according to their genre:

- 1) Individual life passage
- 2) Domestic family, including assets, domestic animals, swiddens
- 3) Longhouse
- 4) Village
- 5) The spirits of sacred groves
- 6) Singing and music
- 7) Myths, legends, historical narratives, and stories
- 8) Miscellaneous prayers
- 9) Word games

Each entry of a text or song is coded as to whether or not the tape has been copied, whether it has been transcribed, whether it has been entered into the computer, and the status of the translation.

Oral literature has now been collected from the following ethnic groups in the Kudat District: Rungus, Nuluw, Kimaragang and Tobilung. By far the majority of texts have been collected from the Rungus. New texts continue to come in. At present, we have archived 245 audio CDs and have inventoried over 1,500 different texts. The transcription of these texts is nearing completion and translations of Rungus texts are in the early stages. Having worked with the Rungus for 50 years, and having an intimate understanding of their culture, our focus has always been principally with this group.

### Translation, exegesis and the Rungus cultural dictionary

The tape recording of texts and their transcription is only half the story. While this certainly preserves this important literature, unless it is translated, commented upon, interpreted and explained, the work is only half done.

Without such exegesis, simple translations of these texts lose much of their beauty and power. For example, certain plants are referred to in the sacred texts, and without further inquiry there would be little understanding of their properties and uses. In fact these are indicators of fertile land. A particularly attractive maiden may be described in terms of being so beautiful and translucent that you can see her intestines. We need an exegesis of such metaphors by those who know them to unravel and explain them so that we can understand their true depth of meaning. It is important to note that this effort is not just for strangers to the society, as members of its own younger generation also do not understand many of these metaphors. Unless we take the time to develop such an exegesis, the next generation will find such texts opaque and inexplicable, with the loss of much of their beauty and power.

For example, we have been working with a 55-year old man who had experienced traditional Rungus culture. Yet with certain texts, even he does not understand the metaphors, nor does he understand what is going on or what is being said, and some of the words are anachronistic to him. Over 13 years ago, I wrote that time was running out to arrive at a proper exegesis of such ritual materials, and this statement is now truer than ever.

Let me give you a further example. A young warrior on his way out to meet the champion of another village dashes down the longhouse ladder, and knocks a young maiden head over heels. At first, she is angry with him but then she praises him for his bravery and offers to marry him. The critical aspect of this text that we do not understand is that when she is knocked over, the text states that you can see her ceramic bowl, her *pininggan*. A *pinggan* can be glossed as 'a plate used for eating.' *Pininggan* is a past tense form that can be roughly translated as 'to have been a plate.' What does this mean? No one knows what this metaphor stands for. We can only imagine, and our guesswork would likely be wrong.

In order to provide a proper translation and bring to it a full understanding of the metaphorical language, we have been working on a *Rungus Cultural Dictionary* for many years. While this started out as a simple dictionary, it is now considerably more than that. The dictionary offers explanations for words by situating them in their cultural context and also briefly explains beliefs, the uses of tools, the rituals that are required for ceremonies and so forth. The cultural dictionary also includes an inventory of the ritual texts in which gods and spirits appear, their characteristics and where they live. This will enable the translator to enlarge and improve on the translation. I say will, as our work is still far from complete. We are adding to it each year from the oral literature materials that we have been collecting.

In draft form, the *Rungus Cultural Dictionary* is already three volumes and serves a number of functions. As we have noted, Rungus ritual texts are in couplets, with the first line in the standard lexicon and a second line in the ritual lexicon. These items from the ritual lexicon are important as they also appear in the standard lexicon as substitutes for words that the speaker cannot say because the standard term sounds like the name of his/her parent-in-law. When translating historical texts and other forms of narratives, it can present a problem if there is no list of such ritual terms.

Our cultural dictionary is arranged by word root, with inflected forms appearing both in alphabetical order and located under the root. Working outwards from the root of a lexeme often helps derive deeper meaning when translating a word.

### Making the texts public

When should the collected texts with translations be made public? In the early stages of our work, we made it clear that we would not make the *rina'it* from certain ceremonies public for a genera-

tion or two. This was for two reasons. First, the Rungus were afraid that if the ritual texts accompanying human sacrifice were made public, the government would take punitive action against them as these sacrifices had been forbidden long ago. Second, priestesses were being paid to perform these ritual texts in various ceremonies and were also paid to teach them to new groups of priestesses. If we published them, we would be threatening their source of livelihood.

However, now that the social transformations have resulted in these texts being performed only occasionally, if at all, the concern has slowly but not altogether diminished. The problem that we now face is the lack of interest by the Rungus themselves in this material. We hope that in several generations there will be a revival of interest in their historical roots, and that this archive will then be of considerable use to them.

### Issues in collecting and disseminating oral literature

From our experience, we can point to certain issues that arise in the collecting of oral literature, and it is important to be aware of the pitfalls that may arise from these, such as:

- Making a scarce good a public good can create problems. It may erode the economic status of the practitioner so that he/she loses income.
- Revealing activities in a group that the government has been trying to repress could lead to punitive action.
- Permitting the identification of individuals whose views the government sees as dangerous could lead to punitive action.
- Revealing a source who may not want others to know what kind of cultural data has been passed on to the anthropologist could cause harm to the source.

- Misinterpretations of data by layman, government individuals and others who do not understand anthropology and the context in which the materials are collected.
- Exposing secrets that sections of the community may not want others to know, such as revealing male initiation rites to females, could bring harm to those who revealed the secrets as well as to those who learned of them.

In collecting case materials for my book on the ethics of anthropological inquiry, I was given a case relevant to this, as long as I did not reveal information on the ethnic group, the location and the anthropologist who was involved. The anthropologist in question published a book on men's secret initiation ceremonies. Women who went to libraries to read the book and see the pictures of these ceremonies were then severely beaten by men.

There have also been rumours among anthropologists of sources committing suicide as a result of the researcher exposing cultural conflicts or as the result of bringing to consciousness intra-psychic conflicts. While such stories have never been verified, they do suggest caution.

### General ethical guidelines

As a result of our two and a half decades of experience in collecting oral literature, we have developed general ethical guidelines for such projects. They are as follows:

- Do no harm.
- Learn and respect the local cultural forms of politeness.
- Establish trust.
- Respect the dignity and personal integrity of sources.

- Do not betray the trust you have established while in the field or afterwards. This requires no dissembling and no lying.
- Do not add to the level of social conflict.
- Do not attempt to tamper with the system of distributive justice. Distributive justice concerns what is just or right with respect to the allocation of goods, duties and responsibilities in a society.
- Leave your sources in the field with a positive feeling from the experience.
- Respect the limitations requested by your sources on the materials collected.
- Avoid being captured by any political segment of the society.
- Be open and forthright about your project.

### Conclusion

It is important to emphasize one critical point: recording oral literature is only half the story. While it is important and critical, it is just as important to have someone knowledgeable in the culture from which the oral literature derives to provide its exegesis and to build a cultural dictionary for the group. In this sense, the Rungus are fortunate to have had my wife and myself committed over many years to doing this work. Where will other such ethnographers come from to compile other cultural dictionaries? While there seems to be little interest in this problem at present, we continue to support the Rungus field team as they expand their activities into the other linguistic groups in the Kudat Division. There are approximately 16 other groups, and to collect this oral literature will be years of work. Perhaps we can train the Rungus team to pick up some of the cultural context in which

this literature is performed as well as some of its complex metaphors and references. Perhaps they will discover local individuals in other groups who would like to take on such work for their community?

However, we do suggest that an exegesis is best made by those outside the culture from which the texts were collected, individuals who are trained to ask critical questions of local informants, who can seek deeper meanings in working with informants and who are able to provide a comparative understanding of this literature.

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George and Laura Appell were prevented by the Sabah government from continuing their research among the Rungus, which had begun in 1959-1963. But in 1986 they were permitted to return to the Rungus and visit their friends. By then little of the traditional Rungus social organization and culture remained unchanged, except for their oral literature. Consequently, George and Laura Appell formed the Sabah Oral Literature Project to collect the various genre from the Rungus and related ethnic groups. The project was so constructed as to be run by the Rungus for the Rungus, with the Appells providing equipment, direction and training. It was hoped that this project would form a model for ethnic groups in other areas of Sabah and in other regions of the world to begin collecting their own oral literature. This article covers the various genre of Rungus oral literature from the extensive religious poems performed by priestesses to cure illness and promote fertility, to the prayers for the rice spirits, to historical narratives, songs, and word play. It discusses the selection of personnel to collect texts, their training, the equipment used, the payment of performers, the transcription of texts, the archiving of the recordings and problems in translating the texts. Translation and exegesis requires a detailed knowledge of the culture, which may necessitate study and analysis by scholars outside the society.

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