

ARECLS, 2013, Vol.10, 231-236.

THE VOICE OF FOREST NOMADS: ORAL LITERATURE IN SARAWAK

AN INTERVIEW WITH PETER SERCOMBE.

HAMZA ALSHENQEETI

"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" (Appel, G. 2010).

Overview

This paper reports on an interview carried out with Peter Sercombe of Newcastle University. Peter joined ECLS in 2007, from Northumbria University where he worked for four years. Prior to this, he had worked mainly in Brunei, Malaysia, Turkey and Borneo, both teaching and teacher-training. His research interests, at present, include sociolinguistics, Austronesian languages, in particular Iban and Penan.

As part of his concern in giving voice to issues raised by Penan, particularly regarding education, language and matters of social development, he has recently been involved in a field work project to collect oral literature material among forest nomads in eastern Sarawak, Malaysia. This interview provides some insight into the significance of oral literature research in general, and in Malaysia in particular.

Transcription conventions:

I (Interviewer – Hamza Alshenqeeti)

PS (Peter Sercombe)

I Hello Peter. Thank you very much for kindly agreeing to do this interview.

PS It's a pleasure.

I My interview is based around the area of oral literature in Sarawak. However, firstly, could you please say something about the hunting and gathering communities there?

PS The hunting and gathering communities that live in Borneo represent to some extent one of the most traditional and successful ways of life of humanity, in the sense that hunting and gathering was able to sustain populations for millennia in ways that resulted in minimal environmental damage or large scale human conflicts. Hunter-gatherers don't have permanent homes. They tend to move around particular areas according to the seasons, particularly the fruit season(s). This is because fruit trees attract animals and both can offer high levels of nutrition. Otherwise, hunting and gathering groups tend to be driven by high levels of internal symbiosis, through cooperation and mutual support, as well as being socially egalitarian. There are no 'real' leaders! Age is significant as a marker of social status,, which is of course is a widespread phenomenon, particularly in pre-industrial societies.

I So, you mean the elderly members of the society are those in charge.

PS That's right, more or less. They tend to be, but they are not really set, more like nominal leaders. However, the Malaysian Government has introduced a salary system whereby every village head man is paid a monthly stipend, a means of trying to ensure cooperation, with headmen becoming de facto government representatives. This is having an effect on the structure of Penan society, with some Penan now having more money than they have ever had (even if paltry sums to others) and certain social divisions have arisen due to this.

I I heard that Sarawak has around 7 main ethnicities and more than 40 sub-ethnic groups. Is that true? And which particular group were you targeting?

PS Well, you are right in the sense that Malaysia is officially very diverse. The groups that I am interested in are generically referred to as Dayaks. Dayak refers to indigenous non-Muslim people of Borneo. This is not my classification, but an official one and is fairly crude in that it does not reflect the ethnic and cultural diversity that is extant among the

Malaysian population. And, one does see Muslim Dayaks in Indonesia, so terminology is only partially helpful. .

I Does each of these groups have its own culture? Or is it like a single ethnic cultural entity for more than one ethnic groups?

PS There is considerable linguistic, cultural and social diversity. Penan are interesting for their singular lack of ritual practices, with no 'official' celebrations, or festivals etc. And this is a not uncommon feature of hunting and gathering societies.

I That's quite interesting. Does this affect their personalities? I mean does this make them less emotional?

PS Well. It is actually partly a consequence of being hunters and gatherers, they haven't developed complex social practices or rituals; and they can't amass a lot of wealth, because they have no way to transport accumulated material wealth. So, being rich in terms of possessions is not important. If Penan had complex social practices, then they would likely need a special person, e.g. 'a witch doctor' to administer these and this may well mean a special class, resulting in social hierarchy,

I How about the language of forest nomads in Borneo 'i.e. the Penan language'? Is it all unwritten or undocumented, or just certain parts of it?

PS There was no Penan orthography before the 1970s. But the Bible society of Singapore developed an orthography with the help of Penan from the Middle Baram (River) region of Sarawak.

I So, when was material about forest nomads in Sarawak first recorded and published?

PS An initial set of vocabulary was collected at the beginning of the twentieth century, there was a classic anthropological study undertaken in the 1950s by Rodney Needham, which paved the way for further and subsequent research. A Bible appeared in the 1970s, but this does not reflect Penan daily language use and is seen by many Penan as a rather odd, although there is a sense of pride in this Penan-medium document.

I What are the main oral literature genres of the Penan language that you are focusing on?

PS I am interested in stories, especially morality tales. A lot of these contain what used to be

prohibitions and provided implicit guidance about prescribed and proscribed behaviour. Interestingly, there is no 'creation myth' in Penan. They believe they came from and out of the forest. Many Penan are now Evangelist Christians. What is interesting here is that their current Christian beliefs are entirely incompatible with hunting and gathering (partly for reasons already mentioned) and partly because permanent settlement is seen as parallel to and congruent with Christianity.

- I** So, can we say that history and traditions among Penan are still conveyed more through speech than in writing?
- PS** Yes, well many 'modern' Penan live largely by means of subsistence farming, as well as hunting and gathering. Many Penan have become text-literate, with the wider availability of formal education, but there is little print or published material available in the areas they inhabit, being far away from urban areas. Knowledge is passed on verbally and through highly informal kinds of social apprenticeship.
- I** Linguistically, how would you describe the endangerment threat to the Penan language?
- PS** Severe. In Brunei, where there is a small number of Penan (less than 60 people in one small settlement), it was clear to see that people were giving up their language in favour of neighbouring 'Iban'. This is not an officially sanctioned language, but it happens to be the language of their closest neighbours who have exerted considerable influence over Penan, for a variety of reasons, among which are an anarchic social streak which sits well among the Penan.
- I** Speaking about your recent project in more detail. What was your approach to the collection and documentation of the oral literature material under study?
- PS** Audio and video recording basically, in collaboration with a professor of religion at the University of Copenhagen, Mikael Rothstein.
- I** To end with, with regard to this urgent initiative to document Penan oral literature, what recommendations do you have for further research?
- PS** To collect as much of this as possible. During our last trip, we collected around 22 stories. These are being transcribed, translated and printed to share among Penan. Even if these stories are seen as legacies of the past, many Penan still enjoy them.. I believe there are many more but people with this orator knowledge are few and far between.

I Peter, thanks very much indeed for your time.

PS Thanks to you, Hamza for being interested in this.

About the author:

Hamza Alshenqeeti is a PhD student at the School of Education, Communication and Language Sciences (ECLS), Newcastle University. He joined Newcastle University after completing an MA in Applied Linguistics (Essex University). Prior to this, Hamza used to work as a teaching assistant at Taibah University in Saudi Arabia. His research interests include classroom discourse, language use and maintenance, and multilingualism.