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A VOICE CRIES OUT

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East Malaysia
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Dear Peter and Friends,

" Ii Ii the voice cries out, pulls until the end.
Like white early mist lifting away
all the herds of wild boar have vanished.
Catching the darting fish -- all leap to the bait
and fall back stunned, tapang trees felled in a row --
fall back stunned, tapang trees felled in a row:
A floating raft.

The toughest driest belian tree is sliced through
by the moving arm of the workman
wearing his fine urine-yellow hat.
This is the king, twig of the topmost branch,
one mile long.
He does not stop until the eye sees darkness.
The leader, like police, just points --
the target slowly falls.

All the herds of wild boar have vanished.
Down from the clouded sky the rain pours, straight
down, rainwater rimming the leaves.
First push with my jita wood paddle,
then go in a vehicle that starts off
by trying to talk, a high laughing voice.

Wi wi they go round, the hours of the day
put on the wrist.
Lovely feathers bounce in dancing,
close to the body stays the blade within its sheath.

Talking on the telephone, telephoning from a big place
a long river away.
A sweet new feeling -- but guard your words against
the crocodiles, the listening police.

Judith Mayer is an Institute Fellow studying environmental protection,
conservation, and sustainable development in Southeast Asia.

Who rushes down, wearing a badge flashing in all direction?
 It is the ti bird,
 bird that races along with the boat at daybreak,
 bird like fire each day flying apart...."

-- Translation of part of a song
 composed by Lungen Sugun,
 a Penan Urun woman, as sung
 to Carol Rubenstein in 1985.*

This song of sadness describes not only the disappearance of the wild boar and the devastation of the forest by logging, but also the disintegration of a way of life and community materially and spiritually connected with the abundance of the forest and the land. This connection has sustained the Penan of Sarawak for centuries. The song also narrates the excitement of new experiences, of travel and telephone calls, calls overheard suspiciously by police wary of the mounting discontent of many upriver peoples confronted with the threat of logging to their traditional lands and livelihood.

Carol Rubenstein, who translated this song, writes "the loss of the wild boar is more than the loss of something to eat. It signals the loss of community. One wild boar alone has enough flesh to feast a fairly large group. This immediate sharing unites the group and binds it in communion with the forest animal whose life force and flesh they have ingested. Together to eat the wild boar is to perform integral pre-agricultural magic." **

This song is part of a living oral tradition reflecting urgent concerns through poetry. The Penan songs are typically in a codelike version of their everyday speech, mixed with words from languages of neighboring groups such as the Kayan, Kenyah, Iban, and Malay. Using words from several familiar languages adds rhyming and rhythmic possibilities; borrowed words can also be used for emphasis. Ironically, the Penan's oral literature is flourishing under stress, while their way of life, based on gathering jungle produce, hunting and fishing, is in peril.

But many other Dayak peoples' oral literature, recited from memory in special song languages, is fading. The songs and chants, embodying the soul of Iban, Bidayuh, Kenyah, Kayan, and other peoples, are being forgotten as the ways of life they depict and the land-linked beliefs they sustain change beyond recognition along with the face of the land.

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* To be published in Carol Rubenstein, "'Like Early Mist...': Five Songs of the Penan Urun," Sarawak Museum Journal, later in 1989. Also in Carol Rubenstein, The Nightbird Sings: Chants and Songs of Sarawak Dayaks. Gordon Brash Publishers, Singapore, 1989.

** Also from "Like Early Mist..."

Carol Rubenstein, an American poet, showed me her most recent translations of Penan songs in 1987. She originally came to Borneo in 1971, searching for a way to re-connect with the natural world. The close and peaceful relationship of Borneo's indigenous populations with their environment seemed to offer an alternative to the violence of the Vietnam war and the war machine, grinding apart both itself and a people, spreading chaos and disintegrating communities through much of Southeast Asia. Since then, Carol has recorded, transcribed, translated and documented hundreds of songs, chants and epics of the Dayaks of Sarawak. She figures that the past 18 years have been more or less taken up with Dayak poetry, whether she was upcountry in Sarawak or considering it from some distance.

"The experience of being in the Vietnam arena and an American made me feel very squeamish about what was happening in the civilized world," Carol explained here in Kuching. Profoundly shaken by the war and its spill-over, she boarded a 2-week boat run from Singapore to the west coast of Borneo to kill time while waiting for a cheap flight out of Asia. But she jumped ship in Sabah, seeking quiet, healing restoration in the company of giant turtles and orangutans at the Sepilok nature reserve.

In Sabah, a poet reflecting on the meaning of "civilization" and reading about the independent spirit and ways of life of the Dayaks of Sarawak, she was drawn to find out more about the area's people and oral literature, and came to Sarawak to visit. At the Sarawak Museum in Kuching, she learned that there was an enormous variety of Dayak songs, but few people with the inclination to record and collect them, and no one with the time or knowledge to translate those that had already been recorded in a way that would do justice to them, to their sense of life and their poetry.

Some people feel a call to become millionnaires, write dissertations, run marathons, or have 4 children. After hearing a dedication chant for a new Bidayuh Dayak headhouse, the community's sacred meeting place, Carol felt called to understand the songs of the peoples of Borneo. She was amazed at their complex poetry, the images of life lived with the animals, forest plants, and crops the Dayak singers knew intimately. But the deeper meanings of the songs were dying out with the old singers.

"None of this was being collected," explains Carol. "It was all disappearing. Nobody gave much of a hoot about it. So I felt an enormous sense of urgency." She felt that her work was all set out for her, the raw materials abundant. All she had to do was go to it. This is the same kind of urgency many tropical ecologists now feel. Putting aside elaborate theories and scholarly arguments about the nature of evolution, they are rushing simply to describe the life of tropical forests and waters, to enumerate species and trace the intricate webs of their interdependence before extinction overcomes the lot.

Collecting songs and poems was not a simple matter. Most of the singers happened to live miles into the interior, up rivers, over rapids, through forests that had never been tramped in by a New

York poet. Let alone by a poet learning Borneo cultures, languages, and the forest from scratch, trip by trip, mosquito bite by mosquito bite, song by song. Everyone was Carol's guide and teacher.

She rapidly felt a responsibility to the songs and the singers, part of a bardic tradition. "They were terribly moved that I cared to do this," Carol reflects today. "Their own people were not picking it up. I stood in a grandchild relationship with them."

But the work was more complicated than simply deciding to do it. Systematically collecting Dayak songs required mounting expeditions. And expeditions required assistants to help with interpretations and translations from several languages, elaborate transportation to remote regions, mountains of provisions for the trips, and institutional support. The Sarawak Museum sponsored the work, and Carol received a Ford Foundation grant to pay the bills for 3 years.

Despite her determination to carry out the project, she often questioned her role in the work. In her introduction to The Honey Tree Song, her volume of translations published in America, Carol wondered "...by what authority did I -- an American poet who happened to go to a preliterate society -- collect and translate material so far removed from my cultural experience. As an urban intellectual, I was not a likely one to slog along on a jungle trek. Many times, when the going was especially rough, I asked myself -- or the nearest coconut palm -- what I was doing there..."

But the treks and upriver journeys were crucial to understanding the subtle signals the poets use to indicate the passing of time, changes in season, in the environment, and in the human spirit. Images saturated with emotional content were drawn from the land, the forest, the rhythms of village life, and long journeys. It was important to be familiar enough with the physical environment in which the songs had been composed to realize, as Carol explains, that "if I had been a Dayak poet, I would have said exactly what they said." Also, like the heroine and adventurer Utan Ping, renowned in songs of the upper Baram River, Carol enjoyed the visiting, and needed to see and hear the peoples of the songs with her own eyes and ears.

Carol approached her work as a poet, rather than as an anthropologist or a scholar in any other discipline would. Though she developed rigorous methods of checking and cross-checking meanings and contexts of words in the song languages, she defined her primary job as "finding the poem" in the material she recorded and transcribed with the help of museum staff. But once her work began to be published, she became a target for anthropologists, linguists, and others who doubted that anyone could accurately translate Dayak oral literature without a thorough understanding of each song language. But Carol depended on the singers themselves to explain the nuances of the songs, and discussions often passed words and images through several languages to catch their truest sense. The words passed from the song languages to Dayak colloquial speech, then to English or Malay, and finally to more polished English. Luckily, most of the images used were very concrete. But their underlying emotional color, beyond the words alone, requires much explanation to be translated between languages and cultures.

Sharing the motivation of many of the "mobile community" of foreigners who find ourselves in Borneo, Carol admits that "part of doing this project was simply adventure and being part of a group of people I'd never known. These people live close to nature in a way that city people don't. It was good to be with people whose essential religious experience was tied up with the natural world, not dogma . . . which is very moving in the contemporary world. For that reason, the destruction of the environment is so heartbreaking and frightening..."

Carol now feels that her role in collecting and translating Dayak oral literature is more or less over, and she is preparing to move on, concentrating on her own writing. She finds that the time she has spent translating another culture's work has allowed her to mature as a poet away from the egocentrism and pettiness of the Western art world. She treasures the experience of a kind of humanism inherent in seeing how common feelings break down the barriers between cultures and link people. But she believes that only by returning to her own culture and sharing what she has learned will she be truly carrying on what the singers here are doing. Much as a Dayak shaman travels to the spiritual underworld to retrieve a cure, Carol feels that she has followed an inner need out, confronted and named many fears, and returned with a more complete definition of herself. Paradoxically, 18 years of journeying into Dayak consciousness has also been a way of coming to terms with her own roots, as a woman, Jew, New Yorker, and artist

"Touching nature" was not much part of her cultural background. "Nature" itself was not greatly valued. But as a socially-conscious poet, she felt that the "touch of nature that makes the whole world kin" may yet save our own lives, and provides an alternative to the alienation so pervasive in Western creative life. Bridging cultures through language has also allowed her to find fulfillment in a humanist and very Jewish tradition of scholarship. The Dayak poems were, for her, nature transformed, the poetry-making a form of nature made acceptable and accessible. The meticulous detail of collecting and translating were scholarly activities, making the spiritual search and rugged adventure "kosher." Learning from the singers was an integrative experience, seeing how they balance several personalities to their own benefit and for their communities. "One moment you're selling pumpkins. The next you're swinging on a swing in a trance going into the underworld. But you're still the same person." Carol certainly has no aspirations to be a shaman, but the creative process that they embody can be instructive to contemporary artists, entailing challenge, journey, return and healing.

Looking back, Carol recognizes with some bemusement at least a tinge of missionary/colonialist self-importance in aspects of her involvement with the Dayak world. "I was lucky to have grown up in New York City, where people crowded the streets and subways from all over the world, every race, every group. Even so, I am sure that here I took on some of the foreign-western-white reach for . . . privilege. It would have been hard to avoid that attitude entirely. . ." But Carol thinks her need to be here related most to being an artist. In the west, that means "seeking intense privacy and expecting to be ignored. It often happens.

You simply are not considered part of anything, not really part of society. It didn't mean that here. Also, the Dayaks still tend to speak in a kind of real-life imagery I like, not in abstract terms. We could communicate pretty well through the naturally poetic image."

These days, when Dayak scholars and the singers themselves refer to her work as an authoritative version of their own culture, Carol admits "I swell up like a balloon -- an easily pricked balloon when somebody reminds me of an error." She recalls returning to Bario, a Kelabit village high in the mountains that border Kalimantan, to check on what happened to the epics and singers she had encountered years before. One of the singers she had recorded could not remember the song he had sung for her before. He started to sing, laughed, and couldn't go on. But someone there was following the song as it had been transcribed in the monograph published by the Sarawak Museum. *** So the singer laughed and pointed to the book, exclaiming, "So, you have it there." He was very pleased.

Most of Carol's writing on Dayak oral literature has included exhaustive explanations of how the collecting and translating were done, a sort of "how-to" manual for aspiring collectors or translators. She hopes that Dayak scholars will carry on the work of recording, transcribing, and translating the oral literature of their own cultures. In an ideal world, she might have been just an editor for such collectors.

For several years, she has tried to gain support for a Dayak oral literature research center in Sarawak that could be a forum and repository for collections of Borneo's indigenous cultural life. But the atmosphere in Sarawak has changed, recently. Politics have not favored efforts to promote the Dayak literary voice here. Carol hopes that in the near future Sarawakians will create an institution of some sort to document profoundly beautiful but endangered oral traditions. While the material culture could be recovered or recreated someday, once the songs are forgotten, they're gone, forever. If songs are the heart and soul of a people, then the cultural heartbeat of many of Sarawak's indigenous people is as threatened as the forests that have sustained their way of life.

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*** Carol Rubenstein, Poems of Indigenous Peoples of Sarawak: Some of the Songs and Chants. Special Monograph No. 2, Vol. 21, No. 42, Parts 1 and 2. Sarawak Museum, Sarawak, Malaysia, 1975. English translations of the songs are published in Carol Rubenstein, The Honey Tree Song: Poems and Chants of Sarawak Dayaks. Ohio University Press, Athens, 1985.



Carol Rubenstein, 1989