



## The Cultural Landscape in Sarawakian Literature in English (SLIE)

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### Abstract

This paper explores the major works in the Sarawakian Literature in English (SLIE) corpus of works (both original and contemporary writing in English and folktales translated into English) from a cultural perspective to demonstrate how such ethnic diversity has influenced the very form and content of the multi-genred works of English writing in Sarawak, published particularly in the past half-century or so from the 1960s to the present. The hermeneutics approach is used in conjunction with a thematic approach, examining related themes in synchronic or paradigmatic clusters and applying the hermeneutic Post-Structural system.

**Keywords:** Borneo Literature Bureau, literature from Sarawak, multi-cultural literature in English, post-Brooke era

### Introduction

The East Malaysian state of Sarawak in Borneo is the largest state in the country and with a population of just over two million comprised of about forty ethnic groups, it is the most multi-racial and multi-cultural state in Malaysia. The little-known and rarely-studied corpus of works in English labelled as Sarawakian Literature in English (SLIE) understandably reflects this cultural diversity. This paper explores the major works in SLIE (both original and contemporary writing in English and folktales translated into English) from a cultural perspective to demonstrate how such ethnic diversity has influenced the very form and content of the multi-genred works of English writing in Sarawak published particularly in the past half-century or so from the 1960s to the present.

It is against this background that this paper discusses the cultural landscape in Sarawakian literature in English. The wealth of culture brought about by the multiplicity of ethnic communities has inevitably coloured the writings of authors of Sarawakian literature in English, and a cultural landscape is deemed the most appropriate perspective.

In studying the original Sarawakian literature in English, this paper looks at various genres—short stories, anecdotes as well as poetry—that were written within the past 50 years or so in the post-Brooke (from 1946) and post-independence (from 1963) eras. The short stories under study include a collection of 35 original short stories in English by Cecilia Ong and published as a book entitled *Short Stories from Sarawak: Death Of a Longhouse and Other Stories* (2004), three volumes of anecdotes by Angela Yong—*One Thing Good But Not Both* (1998), *Different Lives, Different Fates* (2000), and *Green Beans and Talking Babies* (2003); a collection of anecdotes in similar vein but more contemporary in content entitled *Double-boiled Ginseng for the Mind* (2004) edited by Ng Kui Choo and Cindy Wee; four volumes of poetry, two by James Wong—*A Special Breed* (1981) and *Shimmering Moonbeams* (1983), and two by Abang Yusuf Puteh—*A Rose Garden in My Heart* (1994) and *Another Day Wakes Up* (1995); as well as a collection of short stories in English published by the Borneo Literature Bureau (BLB) in the 1960s and 1970s, when the BLB was at the forefront in publishing and creating public awareness in Sarawak and Sabah of short story writing in English.

The original local Sarawakian literature in English is a reflection of contemporary values and issues that mirror the socio-cultural canvas of post-Brooke and post-independence Sarawak, when infrastructural development,



economic issues and the changed and changing social environment and expectations are brought to bear on the writers, and translated as relevant concerns.

At the same time, the Iban, Bidayuh, Penan, and Melanau folktales which have been translated into English and the many Iban, Bidayuh, Melanau, Kenyah and other Orang Ulu folktales and Praise Songs that have been retold in English are also another rich source of culture within the state's literature. For the purposes of this paper, these translated and retold tales are referred to as derivative Sarawakian Literature in English as opposed to the original Sarawakian Literature in English, explained above.

### **Discussion**

More so than mainstream Malaysian Literature in English or MLIE, the literature in English from Sarawak is an intricately woven fabric of the literary and the cultural, from the rural environments and traditional lifestyles that are so vividly painted by the translated and retold folktales and Praise Songs of the indigenous communities living in the remote interiors of Sarawak in bygone days to the socio-cultural facets that are so distinctly yet simply presented by Angela Yong and the UiTM lecturers of the Sarawak campus to the quaint yet naively charming poetry of James Wong and Abang Yusuf Puteh and the trans-cultural canvas of Cecilia Ong's short stories, the society and culture of Sarawak are invariably the unifying context.

It must be emphasized that in analyzing and interpreting the rather complex Cultural Landscape of Sarawakian literature in English, both contemporary and derivative, the hermeneutics approach is used in conjunction with a thematic approach, examining related themes in synchronic or paradigmatic clusters (McAuley, 1998; Bazeley, 2009) and applying the hermeneutic Post-Structural system (Demeterio, 2001, 2006), which is able to provide adequate analysis and interpretation.

The flexibility of the Post-Structural hermeneutics system of interpretation allows for interpretation to emanate either from the text/object or the interpreter/subject, meaning the interpretation can be either subjective or objective. This flexibility within the system allows for greater effectiveness of the interpretation of a tale, whether derivative or contemporary.

Within the Cultural Landscape, there is a need to identify cultural practices and interpret them in the context of the socio-cultural context of the time. In the case of the derivative literature, the subject is neither privy to the past, nor omnipresent, and therefore interpretation and meaning must emanate from the text, coloured by both historical and cultural influences. At the same time, there is personal response to text and contexts in the subject's interpretation, which seeks a relationship of the past with the present to arrive at meaningfulness. The major clusters within the Cultural Landscape examined in this study refer to religion, superstitions, beliefs and behaviours.

In the original works of Sarawakian literature in English, references to religion are of mainstream religions like Christianity. In the same way that the indigenous peoples of the folktales looked to their gods and spiritual guardians for help and support, the characters in the contemporary stories look to their Christian God in times of need or helplessness. Cecilia Ong's "Take care of my baby" in *Death Of a Longhouse* (2004) is the story of a teenager pregnant out of wedlock, faced with the dilemma of uncertainty and helplessness about the future for her baby and for herself and it is to her religion and her God that she turns:

As Laura sat in the quiet peace of the church and thought over her dilemma, she did not realize that it was getting late. Father Raymond had come and tapped her gently on her shoulder to remind her of the late hour [...] The sadness was so heavy on her face that Father Raymond's heart went out to her. He placed one hand on her shoulder and brought her towards the altar, and offered to pray for her before she went home. (152)

In another story in the same collection, "A Prayer For Mother," in which a young woman needs to find the funds for a kidney transplant to save her mother, who suffers from renal failure, Ong's protagonist, Juliana, and her mother also turn to religion and to their God:

And so she prayed. Juliana and her Mother were devout Christians, and through all the years they had never once missed Sunday church service. Each night they were always on their knees to give thanks



to the Lord for yet another day lived. Juliana prayed that she would be shown a way to find the money for Mother's kidney transplant, or better still, that by some miracle, she could be cured. (42)

What this shows is that the dependence of human beings on faith in a Higher Being in times of despair and need remains unchanged, whether it is the indigenous peoples of the folktales or modern-day Sarawakians.

Edna Green, writing in *Borneo: The Land of River and Palm* (1909), explains:

[...] It is the inarticulate longing for someone greater than himself; the seeking after [...] some Power above humanity, the dim sense of a Deity with whom he seeks to hold communion, and from whom to obtain guidance (27).

Green's observation is based, in a way, on how the Iban (like most of the indigenous communities) look to their gods (of various things). *Tupa* to them is the creator, the life-giver, creator of all living things. *Tenubi* to them is the creator and sustainer of the earth and all inanimate creation, and the god who gives crops and harvests and provides food. *Jang* is the third spirit, the god of healing, while their fourth almighty being is *Jirong*, the destroyer, the angel of birth and death (*Borneo: Land of River and Palm* 28), while on the other hand, the Bidayuh see *Petara* as their almighty power. Such a religious background, rather than being an obstacle, in fact proved to be the perfect spiritual environment for the Christian missionaries who came with the message of an almighty God capable of even greater things than their traditional gods.

This deep-set belief in a Higher Being—in whatever form—among the indigenous communities of early Sarawak permeates the tales within the derivative literature and goes to prove that, through time, Man has always found a need to anchor his existence to Someone, Something, more powerful than anything he knows. Also, as there was not any form of written indigenous literature until recent years, one generation has passed on these beliefs and superstitions to another by way of the oral tradition. In the process, as Green observes in the same book:

[...] memories have failed or imagination has added to the story, and so various versions are found, but all through these beliefs and superstitions there runs only the idea of propitiating or appeasing gods and spirits in order that they may avert danger or give good material gifts. (27)

Sarawakian poet, Abang Yusuf Puteh, on the other hand, finds solace in Nature—his Healer, Mentor, Friend and Companion. In "Farewell to Politics" (1994), he laments the trickery and shamelessness of politicians and is pained by what they have done to him but finally admits (*italics are mine*):

[...] Unhappiness thrives on prolonged regrets  
To be happy one must banish sadness [. ...]  
Ask what your soul does seek:  
*I dream of a mountain creek* [. ...]  
*With a godly vow in my heart,*  
I walk a different path to my destiny,  
A meaningful life has many parts:  
*Mine is Man and Nature in harmony* [...] (11: 125-136)

The welcomed or dreaded omen birds of the folktales take on a different meaning for modern-day Sarawakians. Birds and other creatures of Nature are not viewed as bearers of omens, good or bad, but as things of beauty to be appreciated. Poet James Wong in his poem, "Lament for the Vanishing Kanawais," regrets the disappearance of a much-appreciated sight of Nature:



When the evening sun dips beneath the trees  
Along the banks of the Limbang River,  
Whilst freshening breezes caress the Nipah leaves  
Like patches of snow, they slowly meander –  
Closer and closer, in unison they fly [...]  
[...] And now alas, no more can we see,  
Lovely Kanawais flying in from the sea! (26: 1-5; 20-21)

Chinese culture—with its accompanying superstitions—is frequently featured in the contemporary literature in English from Sarawak. This is understandable as the major contributors to contemporary Sarawakian literature in English are Chinese: housewife Angela Yong, ex-nursing sister Cecilia Ong, university lecturers Ng Kui Choo and her fellow contributors to *Double-boiled Ginseng for the Mind*, and poet James Wong. As such, many of the works refer to Chinese beliefs and superstitions, and because of this, there are people who exploit the Chinese gullibility for such “beliefs” and “superstitions.” Angela Yong in “Green Beans and Talking Babies” (2003), tells an amusing tale of how such gullibility is exploited:

[...] eating green beans will prevent SARS [Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome] [...] All my colleagues here in Sarikei said if you eat green beans before midnight, you will not get SARS” [. ...] Later I found that everybody in Sibü was buying green beans and cooking them that night. One shopkeeper said he sold over 6,000 kilograms of green beans in one night [...] (124-125)

Again in “Pantang and Superstitions,” Yong recalls the many *pantang* (superstitions) that she had learned from her mother:

One time there was a big round moon in the sky. Oh, everybody was singing to the moon and pointing to it. A bigger girl saw us doing it and she scolded us. She said, “Don’t point at the moon. Whoever pointed [sic] to the moon must bow to it many times” [...] My mother told me the same thing too. If we pointed to the moon we had to bow to it a few times. Otherwise the moon would get angry and come down to cut our ears when we were sleeping. (56)

Of all cultural beliefs, perhaps the most universally known—and often widely accepted—is the Chinese *feng shui* (literally “wind” and “water”), or the art of geomancy. Although there have been many instances of *feng shui* predictions not coming to pass or going awry, there have also been many instances of the accuracy of *feng shui*. Whether the accurate predictions have been due to coincidence or luck is not for one to say. What is relevant is that among the Chinese in Sarawak or anywhere else, *feng shui* is not something to be laughed at, although Angela Yong in “*Feng Shui*” writes about some instances of such predictions being way off mark and not bringing the desired and predicted results (65-69). In some ways, the unpredictability or unreliability of the Chinese *feng shui* is no different from the practice of augury that is an integral part of many indigenous cultures. When things turn out as predicted, the credibility of a belief is confirmed. When it does not, a rational and acceptable explanation is forthcoming. The general credibility of such traditional beliefs is never easily dented, embedded as they are in the cultures of the people who subscribe to such beliefs and superstitions.

Within this Cultural Landscape, the subject of headhunting has been shown to be an integral part of the indigenous communities in the derivative literature. However, there is, understandably, only very occasional mention of headhunting or headhunters in the original literature in English from Sarawak. Every Sarawakian has heard from one source or another, of headhunting but it is one topic that is rarely discussed or even mentioned in contemporary Sarawakian society, for the practice is today no more than history, and in the eyes of some, delegated to mere folklore. Contrary to what some may think, this tacit silence has nothing to do with being ashamed of what some may deem a barbaric past. It is simply because this aspect of Sarawakian indigenous



culture disappeared more than a century ago, as much as the practice of female infanticide practised by the Chinese is a part of a faded past.

Non-indigenous Sarawakians, who are also aware of the past practice of headhunting, pass no moral judgement on the practice, They seem to understand that headhunting was an integral part of the culture of some of their fellow Sarawakians in a context and at a time when it was relevant and necessary, and they respect that in the same spirit in which their own cultures and cultural legacies have been accepted by other Sarawakians.

The only explicit mention of headhunters in the original Sarawakian literature in English is by Yong in some of her anecdotes. In “Refugees” (*One Thing Good but Not Both*, 1998), she recalls: “[...] I had always been afraid of Ibans. In Telok Bango, my mother always told us that if we were naughty the Ibans would cut off our heads [...]” (49). Again in “War” in the same collection, Yong writes:

[...] Father Buis asked me to go upriver to Grammai again. I was scared of going back there. Luckily, the nuns had already left Grammai and had come back to Kanowit. They had to leave Grammai quickly because there were rumours that the Ibans in Jagoi, in upper Grammai wanted to take heads [...]. (51)

However, in the derivative literature there is much written about and in many of the folktales studied in this research, there are constant references made to headhunting. In Gavin’s “Ubong and the head-hunters,” there is the sad tale told by a widow of how she lost her late husband to headhunters: “Suddenly out of the jungle and the gloom a party of Bakong warriors threw down the door of the hut and cut off the head of the sleeping man” (69). To the widow of the victim, it brings sadness at the loss of a loved one. To the headhunters, it is a justifiable action in the context of the socio-cultural norms and values of their day. There is no moral judgment made on an act that today would be deemed as homicide and therefore wrong. This is the common ambivalence faced in the interpretation of the folktales of old, but ultimately, it is the text, read within the relevant historical and cultural contexts, that dominates and takes precedence in order to arrive at a truthful interpretation. Rigorous scrutiny of the cultural aspects of the text makes such an observation possible.

In the Kenyan epic tale, “How Balan Nyareng ventured to the river of the dead” (Galvin, *On the Banks of the Baram*, 1971 97), we read:

Then Balan pulled out his long sword from its sheath,  
The sword that sticks in the flesh of youth,  
The sword that smites off human heads.  
Quicker than the twinkling of an eye.  
Balan slashed the body of Wing  
As if it was the stem of ‘nyaring’ (a plant)  
The body was then ripped into two.  
[...] As he chopped the lifeless head off  
And displayed it proudly .

The seemingly brutal action by Balan in chopping off the head of the hapless Wing is told in this Kenya folktale in pure descriptive fashion, devoid of emotion. It is the way things happened in the context of a particular time, place and socio-cultural setting. There is even a feeling of pride as the head is “displayed [...] proudly”. In employing the Post-Structural system, the interpreter studies the text and takes cognizance of the description: “Then Balan pulled out his long sword from its sheath [...] Balan slashed the body of Wing /As if it was the stem of ‘nyaring’ (a plant) The body was then ripped into two / [...] As he chopped the lifeless head off /And displayed it proudly.”

Taken by itself, such a description sounds cruel, barbaric and heartless. However, using the Post-Structural hermeneutics system of interpretation, the subject/interpreter is influenced by the extraneous historical and



cultural contexts of the time and thus is able to see the true meaning of such an act, which is not one of cruelty or merciless slaughter but an act of bravery, and something expected of a warrior of the time.

While not all the indigenous folktales are of war and headhunting, it is to be noted that as and when there is such a tale, the descriptions are invariably vivid and the good killing the bad is told with an air of triumph and pride. Reggie Tersan (2001), one of several Sarawakians to have retold the folktales of the Iban in English, in the Preface to his collection of stories, *Myths and Legends from the Land of the Hornbill*, writes:

[...] It was during these moments as the tales unwound that young and eager listeners invariably, transported back to the days of head-hunters and great warriors, when head-hunting was pursued to prove a man's courage and masculinity. (v)

In the above passage, "head-hunters" are spoken of in the same breath as "great warriors," for a man's prowess in head hunting then was proof of his manhood and his courage. While the view from the 21<sup>st</sup> century may see such activity as barbaric, true understanding of it can only come with knowledge of things and actions in appropriate historical and cultural contexts—tempered with personal biases and presuppositions—although such knowledge and understanding does not necessarily imply acceptance or agreement, but merely awareness.

In "An ancestral curse," Tersan describes the emotions of victorious warriors after a successful raid:

Not less than fifty heads were taken as trophies and Balang's share accounted for more than a fifth of the lot. [...] The thought of their loved ones welcoming them was foremost in their minds. There would be a grand welcome awaiting them. (14)

Again, the tone of the writer of the above passage, which tells of the feelings of some headhunters after a successful raid, is one of achievement and pride. There is no hint of any moral judgment even though "not less than fifty heads were taken as trophies," meaning, in modern terms, there has been practically a massacre of a rival tribe. What is more, there is also the expected celebration when they return home in triumph: "There would be a grand welcome awaiting them." That the writer, himself an Iban, adopts this stance is indicative of the pride that modern day indigenous communities take in the gory and glory days of their ancestors. Valorising their warrior ancestors is common among many indigenous communities today. In the retold folktales, such valorization is influenced by subjective biases of the retellers who are themselves members of the indigenous community like Donald and Tersan. Jimmy Donald (1991), another reteller of Sarawakian, mostly Iban, folktales, makes numerous references to the activity of headhunting in his collection of stories in *Keling of the Raised World*:

The warriors began to collect the heads of the victims whom they had personally slain. Some obtained only one, some two, some three and some more. They had to use a few mats to stash the head trophies. (153)

Tersan's pride in the gory exploits of his ancestors is matched by similar feelings shown by Donald, who describes the collection of heads in the aftermath of a raid as if it is a team of farmers collecting produce at a harvest. One senses similar feelings of pride in the author, although we must accept that pride in one's race often colours emotions and influences personal perspectives, a perfect example of how subjective biases and presuppositions bear on an interpretation in line with a hermeneutic system of interpretation.

It is necessary to devote a significant level of comment to this socio-cultural activity of the many ethnic tribes as evidenced in their folktales because headhunting was, for a long time, an integral part of the lifestyle of the men featured in the folktales under study. In fact, in the days before headhunting was banned by the first of the White Rajahs, the elders would educate the young about headhunting. It was a necessary and important part of growing up and being prepared to go out on their first headhunting foray was a sort of rite of passage, something no self-respecting young man could or would avoid:



Heads are very important because they are needed for many occasions. If your loved ones die, only the coming of freshly cut heads will stop the mourning season [...] Heads are also required to bless our longhouse. The more heads we have, the more plentiful our harvests will be. They will also guard our longhouse from evil spirits. During our many festivals, our women carry the heads up and down the verandahs or galleries to show off the bravery of their fathers and their brothers. No maiden will give you even a glance if you have not obtained a single head [...] (“The old bachelor teaches the cousins headhunting” 5)

While the subject of headhunting and shrunken heads has always been viewed as something barbaric and yet exotic by Westerners and non-natives, it was a socio-cultural practice steeped in the very psyche and lifestyle of many of the indigenous communities, including the Dayaks and the Orang Ulu. Of course, it is the Iban who have always been associated with headhunting, but not known to most non-Sarawakians is the fact that this activity was also practised by the Bidayuh and the Orang Ulu—Kenyah and Kayan in particular. As Green (1909) writes in *Borneo: The Land of River and Palm* (1909):

To him human life has no sacredness [...] The practice of head-hunting possibly originated in the idea of a votive offering to the evil spirits [...] for not only is a head necessary as a love offering, but at the feasts held to propitiate the spirits of fertility, that they may give abundant crops to the ground, a newly killed head must be present, and the earth must be sprinkled with the water in which the head had been washed. The spirits of sickness, too, must be appeased in the same way, and the dead remain unburied until a head could be procured. (19)

In the context of Green’s observation above, one could conclude that without headhunting among the mentioned ethnic communities, life would grind to a halt and nothing could have been done. This conclusion, however, can only be arrived at if we read the passage in the context of the history and culture of the community in question.

From the viewpoint of the headhunters, it was: “Always, always have our ancestors taken heads. The ghosts of our ancestors tell us to take heads” (Krohn, *In Borneo Jungles* 274). To them it was important to satisfy the spirits of their dead ancestors—and ironically, other lives had to be ended in order that their own lives could go on.

Although woven into the very fabric of many indigenous societies as it was, headhunting was understandably something viewed by “outsiders” as morally wrong and unacceptable. It is pertinent to note that contemporary authors who retold indigenous folktales have not failed to include a story or two of headhunters and headhunting, for they feel it is an inalienable part of their cultural legacy and are proud of it, a feeling that comes from viewing this activity with personal bias. This is the subjective bias of the interpreter’s interaction with the existential meaning of the text that is evident when interpreted with the Post-Structural system.

It is however important to note that the flexibility of the Post-Structural hermeneutics system of interpretation allows for interpretation to emanate either from the text/object or the interpreter/subject, meaning the interpretation can be either subjective or objective. This flexibility within the system allows for greater effectiveness of the interpretation of a tale. The reteller of the Kenyan folktales (Galvin), like Heidi Munan, is a foreigner, and is more objective in his retelling. On the other hand, Tersan, being an Iban, in the retelling of his community’s folk tales, is subject to personal bias and has a tendency to glorify and valorize the warriors, painting them as heroes and role models for the younger men of the community. There is a need to take cognizance of such a subtle difference in presentation to arrive at an efficient interpretation of some aspects of more complex landscapes like this Cultural Landscape.

It is interesting to note that many contemporary Sarawakian writers like Yong, Ong, Wong and Abang Yusuf Puteh have focused on the behaviours of their contemporaries. With Yong, it is the behaviour of her neighbours and fellow villagers or townsfolk that gets her attention. In “Life under occupation,” she recalls an amusing practice:

We did not have any cloth. Everybody had to wear rags. I knew a woman who had one good pair of black trousers. When her neighbours wanted to go to town or go to the sawmill to grind padi, they



borrowed the pair of trousers from this woman. Three families shared the same pair of trousers [...] (66)

In the case of poet Wong, his poetry has many comments about fellow politicians and fellow golfers, but he talks of them candidly and, one suspects, with tongue-in-cheek. In “Tribute to Sporting Contemporary,” he recalls:

I have a great contemporary  
Amongst the Sarawak Golfing fraternity  
One who is wonderfully sporting and courageous!  
Not because he is improperly hitting the ball  
But it’s just that he has not won at all  
Any dinner bets to date! (52: 1-7)

The diverse ethnic mix of Sarawakian society has led to much inter-racial marriage that is evidence of the respect for and acceptance of cultural differences among Sarawakians. On this subject, Cecilia Ong is most vocal, with several of her stories featuring couples of mixed marriages. In “The pair of earrings,” for example, David and Joan are of different races and Joan is shown as someone who has accepted the culture of her husband and understands it, in fact, appreciates it:

David was quite amused by Joan’s enthusiasm over Kilat’s wedding but he could understand why—after all, his wife was going to witness a traditional Iban wedding in a longhouse for the first time [...] (140)

The ease with which people of different races and different socio-economic backgrounds get along is again shown in “Friends,” another story by Ong:

Ah Meng and Ajai had been friends ever since they had met when they started their Standard One together six years ago in the Mission School. They were from very contrasting family backgrounds. While Ajai was an orphan who had only an uncle’s family to live with, Ah Meng, on the other hand, was from a well-to-do family, his father being the richest trader in Krian. That, however, did not stop Ah Meng from making friends with Ajai [...] (87)

In another tale, “Thanksgiving,” Ong again shows how, among Sarawakians, there are often no barriers of socio-cultural fences and economic divides in their relationships with one another. Meng Meng, a poor boy who lives alone with his mother, is invited by his rich school pal, Alex, to a Christmas dinner. While Meng Meng’s mother is reluctant to go because she feels that Alex’s rich family belongs to another world apart from theirs. She finally agrees when she senses how much it means to Meng Meng to go.

The Thanksgiving dinner turned out beautifully. There were only the Lings, Meng Meng and Mother. Thoughtfully they had not invited anybody else. They had wanted to be sure that Meng Meng and his mother were made welcome and comfortable on this very special occasion [...] (57)

What Ong confirms in several of the stories in *Death Of a Longhouse* (2004) is that, from the socio-cultural point of view, some things have remained the same despite the economic development and the many material changes that may have invaded the lives of the indigenous communities over the years. Today’s longhouse communities may not have to be totally dependent on the river for transportation as was the case with their ancestors because development has brought roads, often right to their log steps. However, the importance of the river to them is still significant. The local mass media—newspapers and television, for example—often carry reports and stories of happenings in Sarawak that feature river transport, particularly pertaining to the mighty Rejang, the largest river in Sarawak, which serves the city of Sibul at its estuary and many upriver towns like Kanowit and Kapit,





which today are developed urban centres serving the hinterland. The ongoing importance of the rivers to the Sarawakian community can be seen in this “Sarawak Inland Waterway Transport System Study” (2008), a United Nations Development programme—Malaysia” (italics are mine):

Sarawak is characterised by an extensive network of navigable rivers, which together potentially form an Inland Waterway Transport (IWT) System. Sarawak has a total of 55 rivers with a combined length of approximately 5,000 km of which 3,300 km are navigable. *Historically, the rivers of Sarawak have been the main, and often the only, means of transporting passengers and goods in both urban and rural areas. This remains the case especially for the rural population in Sarawak [...]*

Statewide, and particularly in the various urban centres, the physical face of Sarawak has changed significantly. While the derivative literature is dominated by rural and jungle settings, it is the modern town or village that has come to the fore in the contemporary literature in English of Sarawak, as Wong in his poem, “My Little Town” shows:

[...] But Limbang is different in a very special way  
Somehow, everyone seems to have more time for each other – shall we say?  
Whether walking along the street, or sitting in a coffee shop  
There is always a smile and time to talk  
Perhaps, a hearty handshake and a drink together?  
A shared juicy joke and a burst of laughter? [...]  
The Malay Mosque and the Chinese Temple stood side by side! [...]  
(34: 3-8; 35: 21)

Between the virgin forest environment of the indigenous communities in days past in the derivative literature and the modernity of modern towns and the concrete jungle in the contemporary literature of Sarawak is the world of many of Cecilia Ong’s protagonists. They do not need to suffer all the discomforts of jungle travel endured by their forefathers, but neither do they always have the opportunity to enjoy the full convenience of modern city travel. In “Homecoming”, Ong captures the very essence of modern-day transportation and travel in some parts of rural Sarawak. The longboat has been replaced by an old bus (except for short journeys from one interior longhouse to another, when the good, old, dependable longboat is still the most convenient mode of transport). Rapids and jungle imagery have been taken over by “pot-holed roads” (italics are mine):

The *old boneshaker of a bus* that took him from City to the jetty [...] had seen better days. Although it did not break down any time during the six-hour journey, it was not built for comfort, for the *seats were thinly padded* and *the spring had gone out of the suspension*. However, it was all that was available [. ...] By the time Langgi arrived at the “Jetty Point”, he could hardly stand up from the hours of *rumbling along badly-maintained and pot-holed roads* [...] (92)

As much as the indigenous communities of the folktales worked in and lived off the tropical rain forests of the state, contemporary Sarawakians work and live a fair part of their lives in cities with good, modern roads, and concrete buildings. And in their own way, modern Sarawakians, like their ancestors, have come to terms with their environment. However, even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, not everything from the past has been erased or forgotten. Periodically, modern-day Sarawakians working and earning their living in urban centres make their way home to family or clan longhouses and relive the existence of their ancestors—and it is in stories about such return to one’s roots that the present and the past are reconciled. Ong, in “Homecoming,” tells it best:

[...] As the longboat made its way steadily along the river, Langgi just sat back and took in the passing riverine scenery. It had been a long time since he had last been in a longboat and he was enjoying an



almost-forgotten experience. Lunga [Langgi's brother] sat beside his brother, pointing now and then to some creature along the riverbank or to a monkey swinging from one branch to another among the jungle foliage [. . .] Langgi just sat back and enjoyed the ride. It seemed so long ago since he last felt so relaxed [. . .] (94-95)

However, what is pleasantly encouraging to discover from analysing the contemporary literature in English from Sarawak is the practice of festive celebrations seen in so much abundance in the derivative literature. The very indigenous festival of *Gawai Dayak*, the Harvest Festival, celebrated on the first day of June by the Dayaks, is today the most important festival celebrated in the state of Sarawak. Work literally stops a week before the festival and does not effectively begin until about a week later. And although it is specifically the celebration of only some indigenous communities, it puts all Sarawakians in a holiday and celebratory mood. Many non-indigenous Sarawakians take the opportunity during this time to visit their Dayak friends in their urban dwellings or in their family longhouses. Very much like the "*balik kampung*" (going back home) phenomenon that sees hundreds of thousands of Malaysians making their way back to their villages and towns during other major festivals like the Chinese Lunar New Year, Hari Raya Puasa (Celebrating the end of Ramadan), Christmas and Deepavali (The Festival of Light, a Hindu festival), *Gawai Dayak* is Sarawak's major festival.

Ong, in "Death of a Longhouse" describes the scene in a longhouse during *Gawai Dayak* in the 21<sup>st</sup> century thus:

Everybody was busily preparing for the Gawai festival. The young maidens were especially busy as they readied their *kain* (decorative cloth), *marik empang* (beaded collar), and head dress, and all the silver trinkets, each of them wanting to be at their best for the Kumang Gawai (Queen of Gawai) contest that night [. . .] The gong vibrated on and on throughout the night as they danced the *ngajat* (traditional Iban dance) and sang to the music. Needless to say, the *tuak* (rice wine) flowed [. . .] (3)

In the contemporary literature, however, it is obvious that many of the contributors to *Double-Boiled Ginseng*, in telling their anecdotes, focus on the preoccupations of modern, well-educated, working women, whereas Angela Yong, on the other hand, is concerned with daily survival, her husband and children and people in her immediate circle of society. The UiTM lecturers talk of experiences with students, their families, and rather evidently, of special children. Being educated, most of them are more open-minded and are prepared to learn a useful life's lesson from anything or anyone.

In Linda Sim's "The Gift", humans learn a lesson about parenting from their relationship with their pet puppy, Kingsley, and realize that "Like puppies, our children cannot be left alone to learn by themselves. They need us to guide them, to teach them, with a lot of love and patience [. . .]" (12)

Also, valuable lessons learned in Man's relationship with Nature are again demonstrated in this anecdote by KC Ng, "Sweet Lesson from the Bitter Gourd":

How like the bitter gourds we human are! Children are like baby gourds. Not all may turn out the way we parents want them to be; but we should be as alert as the farmer whose sharp eyes quickly identify malformations and rectify (sic) them before it is too late (3)

It is, of course, not surprising that the kind of human-animal or human-Nature relationships that exist in the folktales of the derivative Sarawakian literature are not as evident in contemporary Sarawakian literature in English. The animism that underpinned the spiritual leanings of the indigenous people of the past, and their deep-rooted belief that plants and even rocks and stones have lives of their own, have been replaced by modern mainstream religions that have influenced the way modern Sarawakians view animals, Nature and inanimate objects. In the original Sarawakian literature in English, dogs, cats, and birds relate to human existence mostly as domestic pets, and plants as subjects and objects of hobbies and recreation, rather than as bearers of omens or creatures with spiritual qualities. Perhaps the way animals and Nature teach today's humans useful lessons is a modernisation of the spiritual counseling role played by the animals and Nature of the derivative literature.



Among the female contributors to *Double-boiled Ginseng*, KC Ng is the most observant, and her writing remarkably effective. She has that enviable ability to do justice to a simple yet touching tale of human interest by creating the impression that she empathises with her subject and writes from the heart. She succeeds again in “Brother,” about a boy’s love and care for his handicapped two-year-old sister:

[...] he balanced the plateful of food on his lap and started feeding her morsel by morsel, interspersed only by small sips of the syrup he brought her in a paper cup. Never once did he attempt to eat—or drink—in between feeding her. None of the other children noticed the brother and sister, nor did they notice the others, lost as they were in their own tiny world because all that mattered was that the younger one be fed, and he was there to do it (“Brother” 85).

Yong, on the other hand, without the level of education of the UiTM lecturers, can be just as effective in the direct and unusual way she uses the language. In her anecdote about her late husband, her undying love for him comes through very strongly. Despite more than a decade of time since his passing, Yong continues to live with the loneliness of a husband gone but never forgotten:

[...] Now I live alone. I still think of my beloved husband. I remember how much he loved me, how his father asked him to sell me, this and that, and how he never listened to his father – he always believed in me [...] I think of the past days, sleeping with somebody beside me. How alone to turn to your right and there’s nobody there; turn to the left, still nobody there (“Back to Sibü” 143)

In Cecilia’s “Firstborn,” a life-long socio-cultural misunderstanding between father and son is cleared up and the future is promising when the father tells his eldest son:

My dear son, you are our firstborn, our very first love. I think you misunderstand. It is not the money we want from you [...] It is the act of giving that is important to us. It is not the amount. Even if you sent us a few ringgit, that would be good enough. We treasure only that act of love [...]

[...] He turned around and hugged his aging father. Over the shoulder of the old man, he saw his mother wiping away tears that had flowed out of sadness, now turned into tears of joy. For Dave, their world had suddenly changed, and he saw love, happiness and relief through the prism of his own tears. (79-80)

## **Conclusion**

While there are those who contend that culture and literature are different entities and should be studied as two distinct entities, a study of Sarawakian literature in English proves otherwise, for the literature of this east Malaysian state, is in fact, a socio-cultural commentary that provides the reader with insights into both the past and present of a society that has been shaped by its geography, its traditional beliefs, and in recent times, by the politics of development.

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