

KARUNYA: THE NGAJU DAYAK SONGS OF PRAISE

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1. INTRODUCTION

There still exists among the Ngaju Dayaks, especially among the traditional Kaharingan¹ believers, living along the rivers of Kapuas, Kahayan, Katingan and other places in Central Kalimantan, a forum called *balian karunya*² which is, religiously, a form of life ritual performed as a separate part at the end of life or death rituals. Recently it has also been held independently as a cultural or social event, e.g. to welcome guests. This poetic expression is a part of Sengen or Sangyang³ oral literature. Though it is actually a commentary on people's individual lives in this world, it still more or less has religious elements as it is generally presented by the Kaharingan *basir* or priests. In this way it is a means of communicating values socially or religiously derived. However, *karunya*'s audience is nowadays mixed: Kaharingans, Christians and Moslems. They join in the session and enjoy it. This shows that the forum is now more of a social and cultural event than religious. Generally, the impression is that it belongs to the Kaharingans, because they alone cherish the heritage and preserve it. It is now diminishing in frequency and mastery, though the system of communication is built-in within the performance. The younger generation can no longer enjoy it, simply because they don't understand the language. Here and there we find Ngaju words introduced into it, but this penetration is only superficial.

Culturally, it is an ancient work of art which has been so patterned in thought, form and words, that it could not expose itself to change. Even the later form of Ngaju poems or songs, which are called *karungut*, did not absorb the *karunya* form. *Karungut* is similar to the Malay *pantun*. *Karunya*, therefore represents a distinct mode of looking at the world and the lives of people. Its established form or pattern is no longer relevant to the present.

2. THE KARUNYA

The *karunya* session presents the traditional religious priest, called *basir* or *pangarunya*, who uses his poetical and musical ingenuity to publicly reveal the personal and social yearnings of persons such as his audience. His poetry delivery is simultaneously repeated by four or six persons sitting either side of him. The nearer the repeaters to the *pangarunya*, the central reciter or the *upo*,

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the cleverer they are in mastering the art. This is in fact the system of communicating the art to the younger generation. These reciters at the same time accompany the performance with a cylinderlike percussion instrument, about a metre long, called katambung, beaten simultaneously to fit the various rhythms.

The whole sequences of poems — consisting of introductory, content and closing poems — may take more than half an hour of presentation, depending on how the basir himself presents it. Each verse consists of two lines: the first line called the male line or kutak hatue and the second line called the female line or kutak bawi. Both lines semantically or symbolically explain each other. The main emphasis is not on the usual rhymes (of sound) at lines' ends, but on the correspondence of meanings of the respective words between the paired lines. This semantic parallelism is actually one of the main characteristics of Sangen literature as shown in the example below:

Iii nyaho hai mamparuguh tungkupah *The grand thunder (sound) opens its power*
Kilat panjang mamparinjet ruang *The long lightning blazes through space*

In the above verse we can see clearly the semantic correspondence of *grand* and *long*, *thunder* and *lightning*, *opens* and *blazes*, *power* and *space*. (The existing rhymes within a line or within a verse are but occasional and accidental in nature, e.g. *panjang* and *ruang*. Although they may intensify the meanings and thus beautify the verse, theirs is not the main emphasis.) To perform his function, the basir must possess some deep knowledge and experience of life, otherwise his commentaries on people's lives would not succeed. As a keen observer who is also conscious of his knowledge, he seems to have embodied the moral values and norms by which he could judge, and give the sincere praise, criticisms, suggestions and advice which everyone appears to yearn for. In this way, karunya is not only exposing social status, but also acts as a means of control, a learning session on life, a forum to generate norms and values, and provides moments of awareness and self-criticism.

One may also observe that karunya has always tried to adjust itself to developments within society and therefore it gives the impression of being up-to-date. It has derived its diminishing existence and survival from those personal (psychological) and social (sociological) needs, and it remains dear to the people who can still understand and appreciate it as songs of their own lives. The following are some examples of the poems:⁴

- | | |
|---|---|
| (1) Iii ... Tesek bewey kalingun Sambang
hariak nanjulu, kilaw riak
kalawaw kabantukan danaw
Pandang tege karendem garu
haringki, tingkah pahi laut
Bukit Liti | <i>My memory⁵ begins to ripple, like the
ripples of a fish on a lake's surface</i>

<i>My knowledge starts to rise,
resembling waves of a river fish off
Bukit Liti (village)</i> |
| (2) Iii ... Naniha ngalimbang bumbung
daren purun, Sambang, sagila
nyaloh riak bulaw tangkanyahan
Marar taraju pandung hakayaw
dare, sarawe rentar ringkin
hatalumbang | <i>I try to search for an inspiration on
the mats' surface, and seeing the
ripples of their designs</i>
<i>I try to feel the mats' texture, and
suddenly finding the waves woven on
the mats</i> |

- (3) Iii ... Naray mawi purun saloh rari-
ak daree, awi riak ruhung
are hapungkal hiringah
Mambuhen pandung ringki-ring-
kin tabuhii, awi ringkin bunu
habangkalan ranggaa
*Why at all the mats weave as if
waving, oh because the powerful
waves are moving together
Why at all the floor is waving
as if rippling, oh because the
youthful ripples are gathering*
- (4) Iii ... Riak ruhung are hapungkal hi-
ringah, tarantang penyang le-
wu are habambay
Ringkin bunu kutuh habangka-
lan ranggaa, salutih rundung
kutuh baratatay
*The manly waves are gathering,
the selected sons of nearby villages
The young ripples are creeping,
the best surfs of the close-by
settlements*
- (5) Iii ... Ampin jadi ruhung sama kama-
san lingu, kueh maku halaut
lunuk mamua bulaw
Tingkah pulang pantin jarah
karendem, isen nyabiluy pa-
lempang baras bulaw lampang
*It seems all of you are full of
understanding, because you are not
hindering this feast
It appears all of you are sufficiently
tolerant, for you not avoiding this
party*
- (6) Iii ... Kilaw betet Sambang ngaling-
kang jaraw, ngalimbang ti-
ngang ije kadandang
Tingkah antang naraju ranggaw
tapang garu, naraju bungay
due kapating
*Like a parakeet [is Sambang] circling
around to meet a certain hornbill
Resembling a hawk flying around, to
perch on a trunk of two branches*
- (7) Iii ... Sama netep garing kapun-
dukan keton munduk, ruhung,
amun sama penyang itah hin-
je simpey
Rata hajip sihung pajenan
bajanda, bunu, amun sama pa-
ngahat paturung humba tam-
burakah
*Let yourselves tightly sit,
gentlemen, if all of us are
relatives
Please all of you be attentively
seated, sirs, for that is the
gesture of our being members of
a community*
- (8) Iii ... Dia puji oloh saloh bulaw
tarahan, naharep rangkang
Sambang bapa Lambung
Kurang aton oloh lentar jari
puya kalinti, nyambau garun
hengkun mama Sawang
*Never a person became a slave,
facing this naive old man, Sambang,
Lambung's father
Rarely a man became a servant,
sitting in front of this simple
aging man, Sawang's uncle*

3. ANALYSIS

After analysing a set of karanuya verses, the structure and patterns discovered are as follows:

a. Structure of karunya poems is shown in Table 1.

The person's cycle of life, which is part of his history, is clearly described in the content part. It is observed that the change of beat generally coincides with the change of phase. The relation between number of words and syllables and beats is shown in Table 2.

What we learn from these preliminary data is simply that the beat patterns do not significantly influence the number of words and syllables. The number of words ranges from 9 to 13 in a line, and the number of syllables ranges from 21 to 34 in a line. This means that the basir freely composes his verses to fit into the beat patterns. It is also implied that the dominant consideration is the semantic meanings of the paired words.

b. The paired words between every two lines, as shown in the verse samples, are (randomly chosen):

- | | | | | | | |
|-----|---------------|--------------------------|----------------|------------------------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| (1) | kalingun | <i>memory</i> | hariak | <i>ripple</i> | kilaw | <i>like</i> |
| | karendem | <i>knowledge</i> | haringki | <i>ripple thinly</i> | tingkah | <i>resemble</i> |
| (2) | naniha | <i>enough</i> | sagila | <i>instantly</i> | tangkanyahan | <i>matted</i> |
| | marar | <i>sufficient</i> | sarawe | <i>suddenly</i> | hatalumbang | <i>wove</i> |
| (3) | riak ruhung | <i>powerful waves</i> | hapungkal | <i>move together</i> | naray | <i>what</i> |
| | ringkin bunu | <i>youthful ripples</i> | habangkalan | <i>gather</i> | mambuhen | <i>why</i> |
| (4) | habambay | <i>nearby</i> | tarantang | <i>sprout</i> | are many | <i>ruhung manly</i> |
| | baratatay | <i>close by</i> | salutih | <i>shoot</i> | kutuh considerably | <i>bunu young</i> |
| (5) | kueh maku | <i>do not want</i> | kamasan lingu | <i>full of understanding</i> | | |
| | isen | <i>shame to</i> | jarah karendem | <i>sufficiently tolerant</i> | | |
| (6) | betet | <i>parakeet</i> | naraju | <i>fly around</i> | | |
| | antang | <i>hawk</i> | ngalingkang | <i>circle around</i> | | |
| (7) | sama same | <i>netep not moving</i> | hinje | <i>stay together</i> | | |
| | rata evenly | <i>hajip sticking to</i> | humba | <i>go with</i> | | |
| (8) | dia puji | <i>never</i> | saloh | <i>incarnate</i> | nyambau | <i>in front of</i> |
| | kurang aton | <i>almost none</i> | lengar | <i>transform into</i> | naharep | <i>to face</i> |
| | bulaw tarahan | <i>slave</i> | | | | |
| | puya kalinti | <i>servant</i> | | | | |

These samples show us that many words are synonymous, some others are related in such a way that one is a part of the other e.g. *memory* and *knowledge*, *youthful* and *manly*, and some others are related conceptually or causally e.g. *understanding* and *being tolerant*.

c. However, it is felt that an appreciation of the related meanings of the two lines or sentences presents a complete and total impression to the hearer. In some cases the first line is general in nature, while the second line is particular or concrete, or the other way round.

Table 1				
Opening Sound of every verse	Beats of the accompanying instruments	Word characteristics	Contents	Periods
Iii...	Karunya beat	1. Tesek bewey. 2. (Awi) aton...	1. Introduction -describing the situation -referring to a person	Here and now
	Pepet uan beat (Biting beat)	3. Hemben... 4. Dia usah...	2. Contents -the person's family background -his achievements -praises, advices, criticisms, comfort	Past Present Future
	Murik danum badehes beat (up-river sailing beat)	5. Jete rawey...	3. Closing	

Table 2				
Verse Samples	Lines	Words	Syllables	Beats
1	1st 2nd	12 9	29 21	Karunya
2	1st 2nd	11 10	24 24	
3	1st 2nd	11 13	22 34	Pepet uan
4	1st 2nd	9 10	24 24	
5	1st 2nd	11 10	27 24	Danum badehes

4. CONCLUSION

a. Karunya is not meant to strongly or sharply criticise someone in public. It tends to sublimate things into a more desirable form. It is but human, for the Dayaks also are people more responsive to praises than to criticisms. It can motivate someone to act, to introspect or to change. A person may be curious to know his image not as he sees it, but as others see it. Whenever the description expressed by the *basir* fits the reality of the person commented upon, the audience cries out spontaneously. These moments are not only enjoyed by the audience, but also by the *basir*.

b. One of the main causes of its gradual diminution is not only the moribundity of the language used, but that the frames of thought or experiences are no longer relevant to the present. A phrase such as "to pick a flower" for "marriage" may be completely intelligible to today's people, whereas saying in Sangen "tingang mangkungan lunuk" (*a hornbill perches on a banyan tree*) would not. It seems to us, therefore, that Sangen literature is supported by a different body of knowledge.

c. It exposes social status, and makes a person aware of it.

d. Each verse is a complete expression: the two lines explain each other; the second line intensifies or makes the meaning of the first line clearer. It is not clear enough or sufficient to speak of a dragon without saying, in elaboration, (a member of) snake, or the other way round.

e. To appreciate a poem is to plunge into the poet's world of experiences and ideas. When we fail to perceive that world which may be different from ours, then there is a gap in appreciation. Karunya in particular is one such case.

f. Perhaps, what survives from karunya is its semantic rhymes, and last but not least the ingenuity of the composer-reciter in identifying himself with the people's world of ideas and experiences within his own mode.

NOTES

1. Kaharingan means *by itself* or *self-existence*. It is now grouped into Hindu religion and called Hindu Kaharingan but retains its own identity.
2. Balian karunya is a life ritual making people relive or be conscious of their lives; *balian* or *wadian* means *to return*.
3. Sangen or Sangiang refers to the language or literature on sangiang (gods) of the Kaharingan Dayaks. Sangen or Sangiang is no longer a living language and is used as ritual language only.
4. As recited by Damang Y. Salilah (92 years).
5. Sambang's memory.