

# THREE SINGERS: THE KEEPERS OF TRADITIONS

By

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## Introduction

Sabah, also known as the Land Below the Wind, is situated at the northern tip of the island of Borneo. It covers an area of some 29,000 square miles or 76,082 square kilometers, almost half the size of peninsular Malaysia (Ridzwan Hashim, 1993:2-4). It lies between 4 and 7 degrees latitude and 115 to 119 degrees longitude (Mohd.Nor Long,1983:1). 67% of her population comprises the ethnic peoples namely the Dusun/Kadazan, Murut, Bajau, Malays and other ethnic groups, while the rest comprises the Chinese, Indonesians and other immigrants.



Plate 1: Map of South East Asia showing the Location of Sabah

As of 2007, the population numbers at around 3 million people (Dept of Statistics Malaysia 2007). An article found in the Sabah Muzeum Department authoured by one Ismail Hj Kassim and which also appeared in the New Sabah Times, Sunday 29<sup>th</sup> June 2003, says that there are more than 70 ethnic groups living in Sabah speaking more than 50 ethnic languages and 80 dialects. The more commonly known groups are the Bajau, Banggi, Baukan, Bisaya, Bugis, Bulud-opie, Cocos, Dayak, Dumpas, Dusun (including Kadazan), Dusun Segama, Eastern Kadazan including Kadazan Labuk, Ida'an, Illanun, Lotud, Lundayeh, Makiang including Rumanau, Mangkaak, Minokok, Murut, Nabay, Paitan including Tambanuan, Paluan, Papar, Rungus, Suluk including Tausug, Sungai, Tagal, Tatana, Tenggara, Timugon and Ulon-no-Bokan including Baukan (Ridzwan Hasim, 1993:9) spread all over the state, and although each ethnic group may be concentrated in a particular district, they may also be found living in other areas or districts.

Generally speaking, the Rungus may be found in Kudat, Pitas and Kota Marudu, while the Bajau settle mostly in the area covering Tuaran to Tamparuli and also Kota Kinabalu. The west coast of Sabah was at one time ruled by the Brunei sultanate and so in these areas may be found the majority of the Brunei Malays. Folk singers from these three groups, the Rungus, Bajau and Brunei Malay forms the focus of this discussion.

## **The Singing Tradition**

Oral tradition is a way for a society to transmit culture across generations through vocal utterances. Singers of traditions usually perform songs whose lyrics tell stories about their people, unusual places and special events which may be real or imaginary. They create their own tales, but sometimes they also improvise the contents or embellish the works of others as they perform, with improvisations and embellishments increasing in number and beauty as they sing interactively as if in conversation with each other. Although the framework of each song may essentially be the same, each singer will add his/her own style to

the song by ornamenting the story, or adding rich detail. And so each singer develops a particular distinctive personality. When singers are invited to sing together at a particular function, normally one singer will perform first, while the rest would listen and absorb its contents or digest their meaning, and later would apply a similar style or idea in his/her own rendition to the audience. Every new rendition transforms it into a new composition as the contents as well as the lyrics change with every performance. Every time a song is sung, the theme and length of the song itself is affected by the singer's new inspiration, and thus every song becomes an original piece.

## Of Form, Formulas and Tradition

Researchers of European oral tradition such as Albert Lord and Milman Parry have long regarded that oral singers create meaning through rhythm by drawing from a collection of formulas and formulaic expressions (Lord, 1960:1). While this may be true in their studies of renditions of Yugoslav epics, and agree that this may also be found in renditions of songs by the Rungus, Bajau and Brunei singers, on the other hand I believe the melody or tune seems to play a prominent role in the by which the message of the song is carried. Certain melodies carry particular themes, and thus the lyrics as well as the expressions differ from singer to singer as they sing their varying theme songs. In the Brunei tradition, there are songs that have as their lyrics quatrains known as *pantun*, a four line verse consisting of a couplet of clues or *pembayang maksud* and a couplet of message or *maksud*. An example of a Malay *pantun* which may also be found in the repertoire of the Brunei Malay *gambus* is as follows:

Pisang emas dibawa belayar,  
Masak sebiji di atas peti,  
Hutang emas boleh dibayar,  
Hutang budi dibawa mati.

With golden bananas we sail away,  
A ripe one on a chest we save,  
Debts of gold we can repay,  
Debts of gratitude we take to the grave.

If one were to sing a song of gratitude, then one can draw upon this quatrain as one of the lyrics. But there are hundreds upon hundreds of *pantuns*

at ones disposal, and an expert of traditional verse such as the *gambus* singer may invent or compose his own pantun using his own words, clues or messages, or he may import a particular clue form one *pantun* and add to it his own message. Most pantuns have an *a b a b* rhyme format but some quatrains have an *a a a a* form. If the whole quatrain contains no clues but made entirely of messages, then it is normally called a *syair*, which also has an *a a a a* form. Pantuns, like the songs are handed down from generation to generation.

In the Brunei Malay tradition, pantuns may be found in lullabies and cradle songs such as *Amboi Adik*, *Endang Bedayut*, *Indung Anak*, *Anding Na Endong*, *Tepuk Amai Amai*, *Indung Anak*, *Cincang Rabung*, *Si Dondang Mandayat* and *Ampuk Ampuk Bulan*. There are also folksongs such as the *Adai Adai*, *Ambuyadi* and *Joget Hitam Manis*. While verses in praise of the prophet such as the *Berzanji* are performed in its traditional Islamic form the *Zikir Nabi Muhammad* is sung in Brunei Malay in pantun and syair form. Popular folk tunes using the pantuns are *Zapin Brunei*, *Joget Riding Ungat- Ungat* and *Ampuk Ampuk Bulan*.

In the Rungus tradition, the Momogun Rungus verse known as *Bbahul* (Azlan, 2008:74) is also like a pantun consisting of four lines in a verse, with a couplet of clues and a couplet of message, but it does not strictly follow the *a b a b* format. Actually, rhymes can be recognized easily when they are articulated rather than scripted. *Bbahul* are rendered in requests, *mihukum* (engagement speeches), *rumait* (marriage proposals) and social banter. In Momogun Rungus celebrations, *Bbahul* is widely used especially during *mibbangki* (social gatherings or parties), and also recited at the end of the *moginum* ritual when the *Bbahul* is sung in a *klawot* (ritual verse) by the *Bbobbolizan* (shaman). The *Bbahul* is also used during speeches by the *Osukod* (village chief) as this would indicate that the speaker is a man of tradition, and that the speech has a higher aesthetic value than that of normal everyday conversation.

There is also the riddles or *Sundait* (Azlan:74), also in verse form. While the clues are witty and funny, it is rendered in singing form and also answered in verse. In a more serious nature, ritual verses like the *Rinait* (Azlan:82-84) is recited by the *Bbobbolizan* during ritual ceremonies; its lyrics containing a high

degree of mystical or spiritual language considered as attaining superior aesthetic values, thus making translating them quite an impossible task. The common lay man may not understand these *Ddihohoi*, *Ondi*, and *Sovolii* type of songs because their lyrics employ archaic Rungus words. An example of a Rungus verse (transcribed and translated in Rungus by Azlan, translated into English by Hj Inon) :

Lyrics:	Soddu me tana nopitas Ollud me bbanai navadang Rorizan ddi llullumanjang Llangkapan ddi llulumanak
	Tiddi kangkaput mongirik Ati tompipi managou Tu nokohontod ovollon Nokopating ansaddon
Meaning in Rungus:	It pomogunan tupak ddit Osoddu sid motunggung Ibboros sid ullun ozi ddot Varo nopo toguvangon
	Konoddim ddot okon ko Ullun banal Sabab tu noktimpuun Misingillo llongoi
Meaning in English:	The district of Pitas Is far from Matunggong It is told by those Who welcome challenges
	We are called upon By one who is no ordinary person One who has begun to learn The traditional songs of the Rungus

Like the Brunei and Rungus, Bajau songs, too, have lyrics made up of verses of couplets and quatrains. Lyrics will vary depending on the genre of the songs. Songs such as the *Isun-Isun* contains beautiful verses, which when penned down singularly the verses would look like the pantuns. But when it is sung it assumes its own form because certain lines are sung repeatedly, so

much so they assume the roles of formulas like those mentioned by Lord. Here is an example taken from Noorzaila Zainol Abidin, 2002:130:

Basic verse: Kekanda si isun-isun  
Isun-isun di dalam gelas  
Ku kasi pantun ku minta pantun  
Pantunku tidak terbalas.

Kekanda si isun-isun  
Isun-isuni di dalam dulang  
Ku kasi pantun, ku minta pantun  
Pantun satu dibawa pulang.

When sung: Kekanda isun-isun 3x  
Kekanda isun-isun satu di dalam gelas  
Ku kasi pantun, mintalah pantun  
Ku kasi pantun, pantun tidak berbalas.

Kekanda isun-isun 3x  
Satu dulang di dalam dulang  
Ku kasi pantun, mintalah pantun  
Ku kasi pantun, satu dibawa pulang.

The *Isun-Isun* has a melodic form that may be used to sing any theme, be it a story, ballad or poem. The singer is also a musician who plays a violin while he delivers his song. In the past, songs and song lyrics are passed down from generation to generation through oral transmission, whereas the present singers draw upon many sources which has enabled him to build up a vast repertoire of songs, from which he may pick at random when requested to perform at any given function. There must be someone who did compose a particular song, but once it is passed on by word of mouth to countless others, in time the original composer becomes obscure, nameless and unimportant. Nowadays, singers are able to write down the words as an aid in remembering them although in public performances singing by heart is much appreciated by the audience.

## The Keepers of Tradition

Recently, I had the golden opportunity to record three performances of the Bajau, the Brunei Malay and the Rungus Singers. The first two were recorded in the studio at the School of Arts, Universiti Malay Sabah, and the Rungus singers were recorded in action at a longhouse in Kudat, a district situated in the northern tip of Sabah.

### **Isun-Isun**

The first singer is Masruh bin Siadik, a Bajau Sama from Kota Belud. He works as a clerk at the Sabah Sports Council, but spends his leisure hours honing his skills as an *Isun-Isun* singer. He started singing the isun-isun when he was 12 years old and studied the violin from a teacher, Bapak Napsar, in Kuala Ibai. Famous *Isun-Isun* performers during those times were Lemah and Semeiun. According to Masruh he would memorize the *isun-isun* because the words were difficult to understand and he did not know how to write down the “ancient” words. Bajau words are so deep in meaning that only the elders in the community understood them. Anyway, such words are no longer used in everyday conversation.



Photo 1: A view of Kota Belud, Sabah. May 13, 2008.

According to Masruh, *isun-isun* used to be performed during marriage ceremonies and social functions in the villages of Kota Belud. Once the marriage ceremonies end at around midnight, only then do the violins start to wail and the *isun-isun* singers start to do their thing until the wee hours of the morning. Usually, the violin player will accompany a singer who delivers a pantun, and as soon as a verse is sung it will promptly be replied in verse by another singer. There may be as many as three or four singers in a single *isun-sun* performance. Nowadays, *isun-isun* may even contain contemporary poetry. Masruh particularly likes the poems penned by the late Dharmawijaya, and he has included in his *isun-isun* repertoire lyrics adapted from Dharmawijaya's anthology of poems. The first time Masruh performed the *isun-isun* was at the Kuala Lumpur National Dance Festival in 1995.





Photo 2: Masruh bin Siadik, Tok Isun-Isun. May 7, 2008

An Isun-Isun performance consists of three songs: the first is called *Lagu Isun-Isun* or the Greeting, in which the singer greets the audience. In the Greeting he apologizes to the audience before hand in case should his performance be bad or not up to par, or has faults or offends anyone in the audience (see Appendix 1.i). The second song is called *Lagu Embok Seniman*, in which he tells a “true” story of the difficult life of an artiste who was unappreciated and regarded as trash by society. This is actually the story of both his violin teacher, Bapak Napsar, and himself who have struggled in life for the sake of their art (see Appendix 1.ii). The third song is called *Lagu Kalang Ampat* or the Closing. This indicates that the *isun-isun* is coming to a close, and the singer concludes the performance with expressions of gratitude and farewell (see Appendix 1.iii).

*Isun-isun*, according to Masruh, offers advice and friendship through song. In the past many people were involved in an *isun-isun* performance, and many factors have contributed to its changing shape. Faulty memory as well as

new ideas and expressions has brought forth new variants of lyrics and song. In other words, it underwent a communal re-creation. But now the number of *isun-isun* players is diminishing, and its acceptance among the community is dwindling. Only the Bajau Social Club has the answer, says Masruh.

### **Gambus**

The second singer is Karim bin Ali, a gambus player who was born in Kampung Laut, Bongawan in the district of Papar. At the age of 12, Karim learnt to play the gambus from his friends. He never had any formal teaching, and only after 20 years did he get a four-day training and formal instructions on the finer art of gambus playing from the Sabah Department of Youth and Sports. The first song he learnt to perform was *Zapin Tengah Malam* (Karim, 2008).



Photo 3: Karim bin Ali, Gambus Player. May 7, 2008

In his younger days, Karim watched many performers play the gambus in the *Mengalai* Ritual which is a form of traditional healing using music as therapy. This is much like the *Main Puteri* ritual found in Kelantan, where the sick is healed after participating in a performance of music and dance in which the sick

patient is cured by the *Tok Puteri* or shaman by sending off the bad spirits that had consumed him before the ritual began. The song normally played during the *Mengalai* ritual is *Limau Manis*. When this song is performed the singer is accompanied by the *gambus* (a kind of lute), *kompang*, and a *seruling* (bamboo flute). Most of the Brunei songs, according to Karim, originate from Bongawan and are performed at weddings, social celebrations, and official functions as entertainment. As has been mentioned earlier, songs of the gambus employ a variety of pantuns, namely *pantun kanak-kanak* (pantuns for children as in lullabies), *pantun nasihat* (verses of advice), *pantun berkasih* (quatrains of love), *pantun agama* (religious verses) et cetera. Perhaps, the most popular song among these is the *Zapin Brunei* (see Appendix 2.i). Nowadays, gambus songs are also accompanied by the *rebana*, *gendang* (double-headed drum), *telutuk* and gong. The Brunei Malay gambus known as the *Gambus Seludang Mayang* has a similarity to the *qanbus* of Yemen, the *gabbus* of Zanzibar and Oman and the *qabus* of Saudi Arabia. It has four doubled gut strings with a solid body carved from a single piece of wood. There is another variant called the *Gambus Johor* which resembles the oud, and has a more rounded body, such as the one used by Karim.

Gambus lyrics depict social events, personal experiences, and the verses include lines of imagery portraying nature and the beautiful landscapes of Bongawan such as *Umang Tinting*. A lovely song is *Cancang Rabung*, a beautiful story of two lovers that has become a legend in these parts. There is also the sad song of Jamilah who could not marry her lover because of family objection, and *Adai-Adai* is a song about the life of the fishermen of Papar (see Appendix 2.ii). *Pantun Brunei* offers advice to the young ones in society as well imparts the use of bahasa Brunei in its lyrics.

Karim attributes the present popularity of Gambus Brunei to the Persatuan Masyarakat Brunei Sabah which has been active in promoting Brunei culture in Papar, Bongawan and Membakut, and hopes that this club will go on holding courses, workshops and cultural festivals. A Gambus traditional song festival held recently at the Papar Civic Hall has uncovered a fresh young talent, Fauziah

Suhaili from Bongawan, who was the opening act for the gambus performance. Since winning the Gambus Fest Female Solo category last year, Fauziah has embarked on a singing career and has recorded her first album of traditional songs in which she sings and play the gambus herself.

### **Mibbangki**

The third singer, or rather group of singers, come from the Rungus community of Matunggong. Here in Matunggong where the largest community of Rungus lives, the communal re-creation of songs is never ending. The Rungus tradition is passed on through *kihogot* (poetry) including *bbahul*, *sundait*, *suribban*, and *sambatan*. All are in the form of verses and contains proverbs, allegories, parodies and riddles. There is also the *rinait* (invocations or mantra) used in various rituals such as *mongoddim-koddim*, *ddumamai*, *mongorios*, *podshut*, *mangangat*, *mamavad*, *sumolliw*, *momosik*, *mindakod*, *potokon tollidus*, *minsunsub*, *llumangob*, *sid ropuhan*, *modsuhut/ monubbazon*, et cetera. There are 20 types of folksongs found in Matunggong, namely *didihohoi*, *ondi*, *rogima* or *sovulli*, *llumpatiw*, *suringgat* or *luntiyou*, *linsanon*, *sulangu*, *koligis*, *urombit*, *tonggipong*, *pasok bbadjong*, *antabbang*, *ringgawan*, *goyungang ot guntiyou*, *undi marong*, *kandawai*, *kalawot*, *dayang mondongon*, *kuyonggin* and *sundodo*. Some of these are sung individually, while some are sung in a group. When sung together, a singer will first sing a verse after which another singer will *monimpo* (respond) and followed by another singer. This Q & A singing in a group is called *mibbangki*. Songs such as *goyunggang*, *undai marong*, *kalawot* and *kandawai* a sung in this way.

On the 13<sup>th</sup> of May 2008, I had a golden opportunity to meet and record a singing performance by a group of Rungus folks in Matunggong, Kudat. The meeting was arranged by a post-graduate student of mine, Azlan bin Shafie, who is also of Rungus descent. This group consists of Rundabang binti Linsapu, 78 years old, Kinindangan binti Masani, 83 years old, Sinogipun binti Montuduk, 63 years old, Rinjamal bin Montuduk, 53 years old, and Mongijal bin Majital, 68

years old. Rundabang, a bbbolizan, is considered the best singer in the group because she was able to use words of the highest aesthetic value. Being a bbbolizan she could draw upon the *rinait* of which the other singers are not able (or perhaps not qualified) to use.

Of the 40,000 odd Rungus population living in Kudat, Matunggong, Pitas and Kota Marudu, there are about 100 folk singers still practicing the art, and out of this, Rinjamal believes there are only 8 singers of the highest quality, 7 being from the Matunggong community (Rinjamal, 2008). The Momogun Rungus clan in Matunggong is considered to be the most steeped in tradition, but out of the 1490 Rungus folks living in the five villages of Guomon, Sinusukan, Inukiran, Timbagan and Paku,, only 49 of them can sing the Ilongoi (Azlan, 2008:72).



Photo 4: Rundabang binti Linsapu

Photo 5: Kinindangan binti Masani



Photo 6: Rinjamal bin Montuduk

Photo 7: Sinogipun binti Montuduk

Rungus *llongi* or folksongs are appreciated for the singing ability of the singers, the beauty of its lyrics and the brilliant use of allegories, metaphors and aphorisms. They are neither accompanied by musical instrumentation nor dance performance.. And this makes it unappealing as well as difficult for young enthusiasts to grasp the art of singing these folksongs.

Rinjamal, the only literate singer from this group, says that the younger generation of Rungus really do show interest in learning this folk tradition. The problem is due to the lack of tutors or trainers, because most of these folk singers are mainly housewives, who are also old, poor and illiterate. Rinjamal himself has spent the last six years learning the art from his sister, Sinogipun, and he says he still has a long way to go. Passing on a tradition by means of oral transmission may have been successful in the past. But Azlan reckons that without a proper program of active conservation by the Rungus cultural association, these 100 singers could be the last keepers of the Rungus tradition.

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## Interviews:

- Azlan Shafie Abdullah, Interview at Matunggong Longhouse, Kudat on May 13, 2008.
- Rinjamal bin Montuduk, Interview at Matunggong Longhouse, Kudat on May 13, 2008.

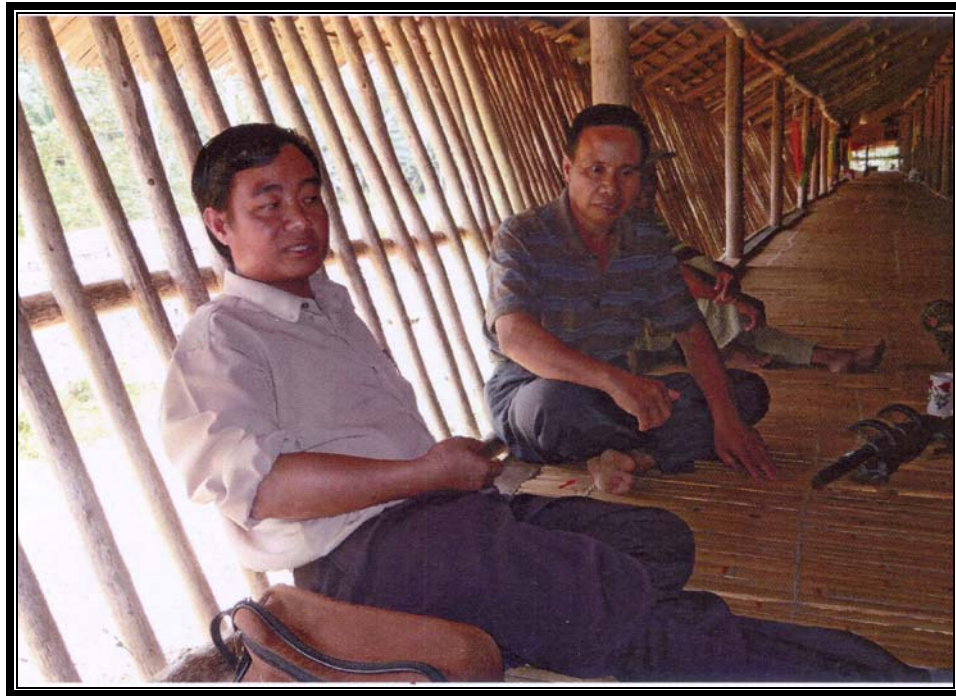


Photo 8: Azlan bin Shafie, informant with Rinjamal, Rungus singer. May 13, 2008.



Photo 9: Recording and interview at Matungong longhouse. May 13, 2008.

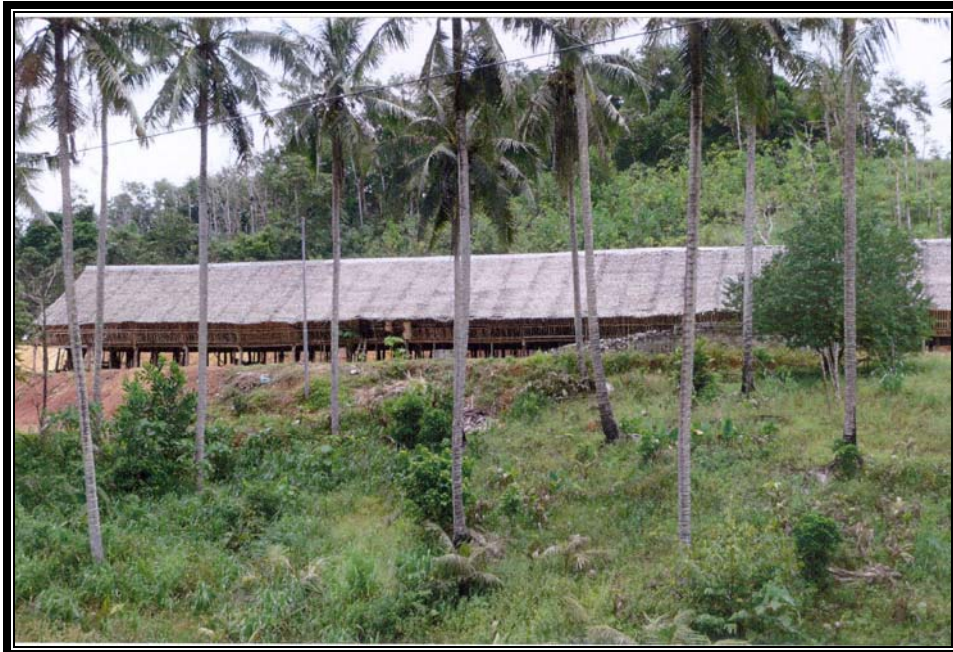


Photo 10: View of Matungong longhouse, Kudat. May 13, 2008.





Photo 11: Rungus Longhouse. Sabah Museum. May 19, 2008.



Photo 12: Model of Brunei Malay house. Sabah Museum May 19, 2008.



Photo 13: Model of Bajau house. Sabah Museum May 19, 2008.

## APPENDIX 1.i

### ISUN-ISUN

(Translated from Bajau by Aliza Wakit)

Aku bertanya khabar  
Assalamualaikum  
Aku bertanya khabar  
Dalam majlis berjumpa, bertemu-temu  
Dalam majlis berjumpa, bertemu-temu  
Semua kita sebangsa serumpun  
Sama kita sedia maklum  
Berjumpa jarang berjumpa  
Sama kita sedia maklum  
Jumpa jarang berjumpa  
Bulan yang cerahlah kita  
Bulan yang cerahlah kita  
Dalam kiraan limabelas haribulan  
Dalam kiraan limabelas haribulan  
Dihitung-hitung usia  
Ibaratkan kita menghitung usia  
Kita bertemu di sini  
Akhirnya bertemu juga kita di sini.

(I translate this as: : *Greetings, peace be upon you. We are one people, yet we seldom meet. So, here when the moon is full, at last we meet here again.* Hj. Inon)

## **APPENDIX 1.ii**

### **EMBOK SENIMAN**

(Translated from Bajau bu Aliza Wakit)

Gesek biola beserta pantun  
Nama pantun Si Kuda Hitam  
Rangkap empat di Kampung Kuala Bening  
Seronok hatiku jarang berjumpa.

Lenggang lenggok aduhai Si Malumbai  
Sayang seribu kali sayang  
Waisan bangsa tiada di pusat kesenian  
Sehingga bertukar zaman berzaman.

Sedih aku seorang  
Memikirkan nasib hamba seniman  
Kau ibaratkan sampah di jalanan  
Dipjak-pijak tidak dipedulikan.

Saya berpantun menjunjung kasih datuk seniman  
Di manalah hendak diletakkan  
Di celah-celah atau di ufuk selatan  
Untuk bangsa membuat panduan.

(I translate this as: *As I play the fiddle and sing the song Kuda Hitam, I'm glad to meet you again. But alas! Si Malumbai is sad, I sing a song that's unappreciated. Years have passed by, yet our art is cast aside. The artiste is like trash; trod, trampled and forgotten. I sing of the great artistes, where shall we put them? This is for our nation to upon.* Hj.Inon)

## **APPENDIX 1.iii**

### **KALANG AMPAT**

(Translated from Bajau by Aliza Wakit)

Aduhai Si Malumbai  
Biarlah dia mati  
Di Kampung Lembah Kuala Abai  
Dalam pantun di timang-timang.

Seperti lilin  
Sebab itulah tidak lama

Bermaaf-maafan kita  
Jarang bertemu  
Semua pendengar  
Aku memulakan pantun.  
Bermaaf-maafan kita  
Jarang-jarang berjumpa.

*Woe is the tale of Malumbai  
who sang until his death  
In the village of Lembah Kuala Abai.  
Just like a candle burns  
Time passes so quickly  
We just meet and greet  
I sing a little song  
Then it's time to say goodbye.  
Well, that's how it is with us  
'Cos we seldom meet.  
Hj.Inon*

## **APPENDIX 2.i**

**ZAPIN BRUNEI**  
(From Abdul Latif Salleh)

Kami dendangkan 2x  
Zapin Brunei 2x  
Disertakan dengan 2x  
Langkah tarian 2x

Duduk berdundun 2x  
Tinjau meninjau 2x  
Mendengar lagu 2x  
Sambil batis diayun 2x.

Tarian zapin tarian dulu 2x  
Beruyung-uyung 2x  
Beradap sopan 2x  
Kami ani penyupan 2x

*(Let' me sing the Zapin Brunei, as you watch, shuffle your feet, move together in time) Hj Inon.*

## APPENDIX 2.ii

### ADAI-ADAI

(From Abdul Latif Salleh)

Turun ke laut Dang Andin  
Memakai sampan  
Sampan dikayuh Dan Andin  
Perlahan-lahan.

Awan memutih Dang Andin  
Langit membiru  
Daun menghijau Dang Andin  
Angin berlalu.

Di tengah laut Dang Andin  
Di atas sampan  
Menjual ikan dang Andin  
Di panas terik.

*(Off to sea in a boat, as we row slowly the wind softly blows the green leaves, white clouds sailing along in the blue sky. As we row further on in the sunshine, onwards for a great catch) Hj inon.*

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