

The Esthetics of Suffering: Two Karo Batak Laments from the collection of Harley Harris Bartlett

The two Karo Batak laments discussed below are part of the collection of Harley Harris Bartlett (1886-1960), a professor of botany at the University of Michigan from 1915 until 1955. Bartlett acted as the chairman of the Botany Department from 1922-47, and as Director of the Botanical Garden from 1919 until his retirement. In 1918 he conducted fieldwork with the U.S. Rubber Company in Sumatra, which was aimed at developing high-yield strains of rubber. He became acquainted with the inhabitants of the regions and developed an interest in their language and culture. He returned to Sumatra in 1927 where he continued collecting plants – some of them, including the *Pentaphragma bartlettii* Merr., were named after him – and ethnographica that are now part of the Bartlett collections of the Logan Museum of Anthropology, Beloit (Wisconsin), and the Michigan Museum of Anthropology, Ann Arbor.

Bartlett was a scholar with a strong interest in linguistics and anthropology. Between 1920 and 1953 he published thirteen essays related to his research in Sumatra, of which eight are concerned with language, literature, and culture (Bartlett 1921; Bartlett 1928a; Bartlett 1929; Bartlett 1930; Bartlett 1934a; Bartlett 1934b; Bartlett 1951; Bartlett 1952), and the remainder are on botanical subjects (Bartlett 1926; Bartlett 1928b; Bartlett 1935; Bartlett 1940). The quality of Bartlett's scholarship – with no formal training in anthropology – is evident from the fact that all but his earliest anthropological essays were republished thirteen years after his death by the Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies of the University of Michigan (Bartlett 1973).

Bartlett's sister Hazel Bartlett donated a part of the Bartlett collection to the Logan Museum of Anthropology a year after her brother's death. The other part was given to the University of Michigan Museum of Anthropology.

The Bartlett collection includes a number of manuscripts written on tree bark, bamboo, and buffalo bone. Among the bamboo manuscripts are two Karo Batak laments (*bilang-bilang*). One is written on a tobacco container and is part of the collection of the Logan Museum of Anthropology, catalogue No. 4166 (referred to as Manuscript A), and the other is

written on a weaver's shuttle from the collection of the University of Michigan Museum of Anthropology, catalogue No. 48466 (Manuscript B).

Manuscript A

The lament is written in standard Karo Batak language and script but displays a number of unconventionally spelled words. It is therefore important to address the spelling of the manuscript, and this can only be done by first giving a short introduction to the Karo script. As with other Batak scripts, the script of the Karo consists of a main set of 19 characters called *surat* that are complimented by a set of eight diacritic marks called *anak ni surat* 'children of the *surat*'. Most of the *surat* are consonants with an inherent vowel, – a. Only three of the 19 *surat* are vowels. These are the *surat* I (☐), U (☐) and the *surat* Ha (☐), which can also have the value /a/ in the syllable-initial position, e.g. 'anak'. The diacritic marks represent the vowels (e, é, i, o, and u), final nasal and aspirant (ŋ and ʰ) and the virama (*penengen*), which deprives the *surat* of their inherent –a vowel and can be added to the *surat* of the main set. The diacritics change the value of the *surat* as demonstrated by the letter ka (☐): ☐ ké – ☐ ki – ☐ ko – ☐ ku – ☐ ke – ☐ kang – ☐ kah – ☐ k. Every diacritic has its own name as shown Table 1.

Table 1. Diacritics

	Value	Sound value	Form and position
Ketéléngen	é	é	☐B
Kelawan	i	i	☐o or ☐i
Ketolongen	o	o	☐B or ☐B
Sikurun	u	u	☐x
Kebereten	e	ʼ	☐B
Kebincaren	ng	ŋ	☐B
Kejeringen	h	ʰ	☐B
Penengen			☐B-

Syllable-initial vowels can be represented by a combination of the *surat* Ha (☐) and any vowel sign as shown in Table 1. In manuscript A, syllable-initial /i/ and /u/ are normally represented by Ha plus the respective diacritic instead of using the *surat* I and U. The latter (☐) is not used at all, and (☐) is used only twice (in lines 4 and 27). This is, however, a quite common feature of the

Karo script, in which the *surat* I and U are used sparingly or not at all.¹

The *surat* Nga (<) can only be used in the syllable-initial position and can never be muted by the *penengen* because the diacritic /ng/ (*kebincaren*) must be used in the syllable-final position. This rule is frequently violated in manuscript A where the *surat* Nga is used in syllable-final position: *Pasang* in line 11 is written — ƶ < - where the *kebincaren* should have been used: — ƶ̄ . This is not a single occurrence, but appears throughout the text:

Table 2. Unconventional Spelling in Ms. A

Line	Word	Spelling used in Ms. A	Conventional spelling
12	ni[m]bang-ni[m]bangi ²	ᵐᵐᵐ<-ᵐᵐᵐ<ᵐ	ᵐᵐᵐ̄ᵐᵐᵐ<ᵐ
16/17	deng(ng)a ³	<<ᵐ-<	<< or <ᵐ
22, 24, 29/30	(e)ngkahe	ᵐ<ᵐ-ᵐᵐ	ᵐᵐᵐᵐ
33	enggo	ᵐ<ᵐ-ᵐ̄	ᵐᵐᵐ̄ or ᵐᵐᵐ̄
39, 41	na[ng]keng	ᵐᵐ<ᵐ-	ᵐᵐᵐ̄

Since the writer uses this unconventional spelling in all syllables with syllable-final /ng/ where the vowel is /e/ (i.e. where we have a sequence of S1-S2-D1-D2⁴ where S2 = Nga, D1 = *kebereten* D2 = *penengen*) it can be concluded that it was done purposely. This is confirmed by the fact that the writer used the conventional spelling in syllables with syllable-final /ng/ where the vowel is not /e/; *Sembiring* (7 occurrences), *utang* (3 occurrences), *tandang* (2 occurrences), and *Ginting* (2 occurrences) are spelled correctly, and the correct spelling is also used for *bilang-bilang*, *buang*, *muang*, *sukapiring*, *terang*, and *sirang*. Considering that the writer consistently used the conventional spelling in these cases, it is surprising that he spelled *nimbang* in line 12 with the character Nga followed by the *penengen*.

This is not the only manuscript in which syllable-final /ng/ is rendered by the combination of Nga and *penengen*, but these cases are extremely rare. Especially interesting

¹ In manuscript B, however, the letters ƶ and ƶ̄ are always used.

² Regularly omitted nasals are put into square brackets.

³ Letters written in the manuscript that are not rendered according to the modern spelling convention are placed in parentheses.

⁴ S=*surat*, D= diacritic

is this manuscript in so far as that here a writer systematically violated the spelling convention.

The Dutch scholar Petrus Voorhoeve transliterated manuscript A during his America journey in 1979⁵. Voorhoeve's transliteration and mine only differ on a few minor points. Voorhoeve read *anakberé* instead of *anakberu* (line 8), *sipating* instead of *sipati* (line 16), and *picesnya* instead of *picetna* in line 19.

The diacritic that should have been *sikurun* in *anakberu* (line 8) is not very clear (it looks more like a short line rather than a cross). Its position clearly shows that it cannot be the *ketélengen* – therefore ruling out a reading as *anakberé*.

The small horizontal line above the last *surat* of the word *sipati* in line 16 was interpreted by Voorhoeve as being the *kebincaren*. The line is, however, too far to the left to justify a reading as *sipating*. No other reading of this horizontal line is possible, so it can be assumed that it was placed by mistake.

The last *surat* of the word that was interpreted by Voorhoeve as *pices*, is clearly a /t/ and not an /s/. I have also based my interpretations of the script on the contextual meaning and all three words make perfect sense in their respective contexts.

Apart from the unconventional spelling discussed above, the manuscript contains a few minor spelling errors. *Mehuli* is wrongly spelled *muhuli* in line 7, but the correct spelling is used in line 6 and also in line 17. *Mingko-ingko* in line 4 is probably a dialectical variant of *mangko-angko*. I could not find a reference for *ingko* in any Batak dictionary and the spelling *mango-angko* is frequently used in the same context in other manuscripts. The omission of the second /k/ (ꨀ-) in the word *kutaktaki* is apparently a spelling error.

The transliteration of these manuscripts follows the system outlined in an earlier work (Kozok 2000). Transliteration 1 is a letter-for-letter, word-for-word rendering of the text. The second transliteration corrects the few obvious mistakes mentioned above, structures the text into semantic units, and adapts it to the modern spelling convention of the Karo language. Texts written in Karo Batak script typically share a number of features that are not rendered according to the modern spelling convention. This includes the use of the glide consonants Wa and Ya in vowel sequences, e.g. *iyo* and *buwang* that are now spelled *io* and *buang*, and

⁵ The transliteration is part of the *Collectie P.Voorhoeve* in the Oriental Collections *Legatum Warnerianum* of the Universiteitsbibliotheek Leiden (Netherlands).

the omission of prenasalization, e.g. *éda* instead of *énda*, *niku* for *ningku* etc. The prefix *er-* is usually spelled *re-* (ꞑꞑ), but not always as we will see in the discussion of manuscript B.⁶

The Karo script conserved a number of archaisms such as the spelling *si[m]biring* for the clan Sembiring, the use of the passive prefix *ni-* and preposition *ni* (both are now always *i*), the use of the genitive marker *nu* (now always *ni*), and the suffix *-an* (instead of *-en*).⁷

Manuscript A represents a fairly typical lament in that it uses a number of formulaic expressions that can be found in many other *bilang-bilang*. It begins with the standard opening formula *maka io ari kuté bilang-bilang* – an archaic phrase that cannot be readily translated – in which the lament genre is specified. The opening formula has a number of optional extensions of which three are found here: The first is the mentioning of the writing material, here ‘oil bamboo’. The second extension is in line 2, which by itself can carry its own extension that is found here in line 3. The third extension of the opening formula is contained in lines 4 and 5.

The opening formula reveals what Karo laments are about – the insignificance of man in nature as expressed through the allegory of the thick earth and the vast sky, and the inevitability of *pengindo* – destiny or fate.

Karo society was even more strongly defined by interpersonal kinship relations at the time when the manuscript was written – probably in the second decade of this century – than it is now. An individual only existed by having *anakberu-senina*, literally ‘wife-taker and clan-mates’, which is an institution of assigned kinsmen whose importance cannot be underestimated – without them an individual could not function socially and was legally incompetent.⁸

This lament depicts the worst of all scenarios – the narrator had been expelled by his own clan in the *urung* (federation of villages) of Sukapiring in the Karo highlands. He had to leave his homeland not only because he was a highly indebted gambler but also because he had lost the trust of his *anakberu-senina*. He then addressed in direct speech another male of

⁶ For a more detailed description of the Karo spelling see Kozok (1999; 2000a).

⁷ It is interesting to note that the writer used the preposition *ni* in the opening formula only, but not in the text itself where it is always rendered as *i*. Archaic forms are apparently best preserved in stereotypic formula that change little over time.

⁸ For a thorough study of the *anakberu-senina* system and its decline after the onset of colonization see Westenberg (1914).

the Karo-Karo clan and asked him for advice about how his fate could be changed to the better regarding his high gambling debts.⁹ The Karo-Karo proposed that they should go to the Malay lowlands (*ngkahé* – to go downstream always refers to the Malay east coast) – the traditional destination of those who have been expelled from their clan. Since the verb *tegu* ‘lead’ is used, it can be assumed that they intended to sell horses in the lowlands.¹⁰ Horses bred in the Batak high lands, and especially from the island Samosir in Lake Toba, were in high demand among the Malays and were traded on the east coast of Sumatra and even on the Malay peninsula. Arriving in the lowlands (*jahé*) the horses disappeared.¹¹ In his despair the narrator prayed to the ancestor spirits (*bégu*) offering betel quid (*cibal belo*), the simplest and most frequent offering given to ancestor spirits.¹² Through the help of the ancestor spirits he finally found his horses.

At this stage a third person of the Ginting clan advised him to take his horses back to the highlands. Why he did not want to sell them or could not sell them remains unclear. He replies that he cannot bring the horses back to the highlands because of his high debts.

The main reason for debt was gambling, which was reported to be extremely widespread in pre-modern and early modern Karo society. The most famous game was the *main judi*, a kind of roulette with six digits, *rouge* and *noir* (Wijngaarden 1894a:61). Missionary Wijngaarden reports that many gamblers spent months wandering from place to place. Gambling debts were a common cause of theft and even homicide. Sons ruined their parents, who – as long as they still had money – paid the debts of her children because it was considered a disgrace if a family member was put into the stock. According to Wijngaarden (1894b), it even happened that gamblers sold their spouses and children as bonded laborers, but of course gamblers themselves could end up as bonded laborers when their family was unwilling to pay them out of the stock.

⁹ The person of the Karo-Karo clan is addressed as *mama* ‘mother’s brother’. It can therefore be assumed that the wife of the Sembiring is from the Karo-Karo clan.

¹⁰ Before the road to Medan was established in 1907 the only path that could be passed by horse was the Sepuluh Dua Kuta pass.

¹¹ Reference to frequent horse theft in the pre-colonial society is made in another lament – Ms. 1149 of the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin. A description of this manuscript can be found in Kozok (2000a).

¹² The quid consist of a small piece of the betel nut (*areca catechu*), wrapped in betel leaf (*piper betel*), with mineral lime usually added as a catalyst. Betel is a light stimulant drug that is enjoyed by Karo men and spirits likewise.

The lament is written on a bamboo container made of *buluh minak* or oil bamboo, which has a dark yellow shiny epidermis. This is the sort of bamboo that is most commonly used for tobacco containers (*tabung pertimbakon*), which are usually covered with a wooden lid.¹³ Tobacco was consumed by both sexes as a condiment to the betel quid. According to the missionaries Neumann and Joustra, who published a few *bilang-bilang* in the beginning of the last century, Karo laments are always love laments – even when this is not apparent from the text (Joustra 1902; Neumann 1929; Neumann 1930; Neumann 1933). The tobacco containers were presented to the beloved as a token (*tanda*) or proof of affection in the custom of courtship (*adat naki-naki*).¹⁴ As I have shown in an earlier publication (KOZOK 2000a) this was certainly not the only function of the genre. Many laments can be interpreted as having a protective and preventive function in that they allow an individual to ward off one's ill fate by writing it onto the (sometimes personified) bamboo using the Batak script, which by itself already possesses strong magical power.

Manuscript B

This manuscript provides a good example of a love lament. It addresses the beloved, a woman of the Tarigan clan. The immediate recipient of the lament is, however, not the beloved but an unnamed person who is addressed as *silih*, literally 'brother-in-law' – a common term of address for males. In pre-colonial Batak society, literacy was restricted to men only, and love laments had to be read to the beloved through an intermediary.

This is one of few manuscripts written on a shuttle made of bamboo, 31 cm long, and 2.6 cm in diameter. Of more than 120 laments that I have seen, only four are written on shuttles (*tuldak*) and three of those are love laments.¹⁵ With its phallic shape a *tuldak* is symbol of masculinity, and the gift of such an object to the beloved certainly has an intended erotic component.

¹³ The Logan Museum container does not have a cover. It is possible that it was lost. Even if it had one it would not fit anymore because the bamboo is split between lines 34 and 35, which fortunately does not affect the readability of the manuscript.

¹⁴ Besides tobacco containers betel-lime containers were equally frequent used as carriers of laments.

¹⁵ The fourth manuscript can be disregarded since it is one of the 'historical laments', in which the 'new order' of the colonial regime is criticized. Although written on traditional instruments such as shuttles and betel-lime containers they constitute a modern expression of the genre, and are very likely detached from the lament's original social context as part of a courting ritual.

I published this manuscript with a German translation in my PhD thesis. The transliteration was based on a transliteration made by Mary Margaret Steedly, who was so kind to transliterate the manuscript for me. It is only now that I have been able to check the transliteration. There are a few minor differences in the transliteration. Steedly's transliteration has noted fewer mistakes made by the writer of the lament – likely the result of an unconscious instant correction at the time of transliterating the text, and for some reasons we arrived at different line breaks. The total number of lines is 23 and not 19.

Steedly noted that the writer omitted the letter /na/ in line 6 when he wrote seni[na]ku. A similar omission is found in line 22: ka[ta]ku. *Perpadayane* (—ꦥꦥꦢꦪꦤ) in line 21 is most likely a misspelling of *perpadéyen* (—ꦥꦥꦢꦺꦪꦤ) = *perpandén*. In addition to these mistakes I found twice the unconventional spelling *karahbaban* instead of *karababan* (lines 14 and 18), and a omission of one character in line 19: ni[ku]. Steedly skipped two words (both of no importance in as far as the comprehension of the text is concerned), namely *giya* in line 13 and *nageri* in line 17. Other minor differences are that Steedly read *tongal* rather than *togal* (line 7), and *karangen* instead of *kerangen*.

In line 3 we find two different spellings for *erlajar*, namely *relajar* (ꦫꦭꦗꦫ) and *herlajar* (ꦲꦫꦭꦗꦫ). Steedly noted only one spelling for both cases, which is the conventional *relajar*. The word *erlajar* consists of the prefix *er-* and the base *lajar*. In order to facilitate the writing of this frequently occurring prefix the Karo arrived at the convention to spell the prefix *re* (ꦫꦺ), which is far more economic than the rather complicated rendering as *(h)er-* (ꦲꦫꦺ).

The writing used is standard Karo Batak writing, which is very similar to the other Batak scripts. The first Batak people to use the script were the Mandailing, where the script was originally developed. Mandailing is the only Batak dialect in which the sound /ny/ occurs, which is represented by the letter ꦤ. Despite the absence of the /ny/ sound in the other dialects the letter was never abandoned in saying or writing out the alphabet. Karo differs from the southern dialects in that it has a /c/ sound¹⁶. They solved the problem by simply

¹⁶ Pronounced /ch/ as in check.

assigning the value /c/ to the obsolete letter ꦑ as can be seen in line 10 (*nurikenca*). Another form of the letter /ca/ also exists: ꦑꦏ, which is used in Manuscript A.

One characteristic of the Karo script is the occasional reduplication of ambisyllabic consonants. *Gemes* in line 3 and *emas* in line 16 with ambisyllabic structures gem-mes and em-mas, can be either rendered as *gemes* (ꦒꦼꦩꦼꦩꦺꦱ) or *gemmes* (ꦒꦼꦩꦩꦺꦱ), *emas* (ꦺꦩꦼꦩꦼꦱ) or *emmas* (ꦺꦩꦩꦼꦱ). The writer chose the second option, which is only found in a few other manuscripts. Otherwise the spelling of this manuscript follows the same conventions as outlined above.

The shuttle is intended as a gift to the beloved (Tarigan) of the first-person-narrator (Karo-Karo). He hopes that she will take up weaving and also plaiting so that the plaited mats can serve as the meeting place for his *anakberu-senina*. Even today many Karo still use plaited pandanus mats – chairs were introduced by the Dutch in the early 20th century and mattresses even later. Plaited mats also constituted an important part of the marriage gifts bestowed by the bride-takers. As indicated in line 9, the man of the Karo-Karo clan is apparently in conflict with his *anakberu-senina* and hopes that the marriage with the Tarigan woman might help reconcile him with his family.

He uses the popular simile of shimmering heat waves to describe his state of social desolation. The heat waves that dance in the air are not attached to anything. So is his fate – being deprived from the support of his people; like the refracted light rays he floats around drifting aimlessly through life with nobody to rely on. Moreover he is an only child, a common theme in Karo Batak laments, and therefore cannot find support from his immediate siblings. He sees himself as exiled, forced to wander through the mountainous forests that separate the Karo highland from the Malay east coast.

The east coast, here described as the gathering place of the ill fated, was the main destination for those who were forced to leave the Karo highlands. Concluding the lament, he uses the simile of little scraps of precious metals that are carefully gathered by the goldsmith. He compares this with his own scattered journey where there will be no place for him to settle.

The two texts from the Bartlett collection are in so far special as they are to my knowledge the only Karo Batak laments in American collections. Worldwide the number of

Karo Batak laments is at least 125 (Kozok 2000a). They consist of love and destiny laments, but also of short text fragments, that served either as spelling aids to learn the Karo alphabet, or as magical devices (Kozok 2000b). Another interesting subgenre is the “historical” lament of the early 20th century, in which the writer complains about the changes that Dutch rule has brought to the Karo highlands after its annexation in 1904. The two laments of the Bartlett collection give insofar only a small insight into the rather complex nature of the genre. They are, however, representative of the genre lament in that they are fairly typical love and destiny laments, which constitute the vast majority of Karo laments.

As a matter of fact the themes that have been brought forward in these two laments, occur time and again. One of the standard themes is that of the orphan who lost his parents at an early age. He became a gambler, and lost all his money, and was finally expelled by his family. In composing a lament the writer can choose out of a limited number of themes in form of formulaic phrases, similes, and pantun. It is evident from the formulaic character of the laments that they root in the oral tradition. The receiver of such a lament knows of course that the story is fictitious:

“It is a strange performance, in which everything is done to create a feeling of longing and pity. Both parties know quite well that the whole story is made up, but that doesn't matter. What is important is to achieve a certain ambience, an atmosphere where tears will be shed.”¹⁷ (Neumann 1933:184)

A successful performance in creating a sentimental feeling was apparently more important than the content of the lament. It is certainly no coincident that the contemporary popular music of the Karo distributed on audiocassette is set in precisely the same mood – joyful songs are virtually unknown. Popular song titles include *Aku kalak mesera* ‘I am an ill-fated person’, *Seh kal suina* ‘So painful’ or *Erkadiola* ‘Regret’. Young people do not only listen to these songs but they play them on the guitar, the most popular musical instrument of European origin. Songs are, however, rarely sung as they were on the cassette. The singer will use his own clan name and not the one that was originally used on the tape. Of course he will also adjust the woman’s clan name in case it is a song about unhappy love.

¹⁷ De voordracht ist eigenaardig, daar alles er op berekend is om een gevoel van smart, van medelijden op te wekken. Beide partijen weten heel goed dat het geheele verhaal gefingeerd is. Maar dat doet er niet toe, men wenscht in een stemming te komen, in een stemming waarbij veel tranen vloeien.

M. Salleh has drawn our attention to the esthetic of sorrow (*nestapa*) that has played an important role especially in the early phase of Malay literature. The misery of the lonesome wanderer in a foreign land, the suffering of unhappy love affair, are popular themes not only in the Hikayat literature, but also in the popular genre of the pantun. The audience can easily identify with the protagonist and the general misery of the story, which makes it attractive but also norm-forming. The audience is emotionally touched by the narrative that soothes their own suffering, relieves their worries. It is thus not only attractive but also norm-forming with a didactical quality. The *nestapa* concept is extensive and covers a wide range of emotions.

"Many narratives attempt to touch on almost all of these shades of misery in order to paint the complex nature of the dark experience of *nestapa*.

Though essentially human in its fictional manifestation this is a sorrow that has cosmic connotations, and therefore with distinct religious implications." (Salleh 1993:6)

Nestapa can either be human-induced or of divine origin. A similar *nestapa* concept does also exist among the Karo and is best manifested in Karo laments. The religious connotation is already apparent from the name that was given to the genre: *bilang-bilang*. In Warneck's Toba Batak dictionary we find "*pinter bilang* (or just *bilang*), an exclamation uttered at the beginning of a dispute to ask the gods to decide which party is right. The Batak belief that the outcome of every battle is determined by divine justice; *marbilang* remonstrate; (...) *marbilanghon* (...) curse, condemn, swear."¹⁸ (Warneck 1977) *Bilang* in the meaning of curse is also contained in the Karo phrase *kebilangen dibata* 'cursed by the gods'. I also found *erbilang* in a manuscript that in its context can only be translated as 'to curse'.¹⁹

The Karo equivalent to *nestapa* is *kiniseran*. *Sera* and *serana* 'suffer', and the adjective *mesera* are usually complimented by *sui* 'pain' (*sera-suina*). Emotional pain is perceived through the liver (*até*). In 125 laments I found about 400 occurrences of *até mesui* 'the suffering heart' not including the numerous other terms that describe suffer and pain. Synonym to *até* is *pusuh* 'heart', which can be *picet* 'glum', *rabut* 'confused', *céda* 'broken, *la joré* 'without order' or *la tembé* 'uncertain' so that one becomes a *perliah*. *Liah*

¹⁸ "*Pinter bilang* (oder nur *bilang*), ruft man beim Beginn des Streits; man bittet damit die Götter, recht zu wägen, auf wessen Seite das Recht ist. Nach bat.[akscher] Auffassung ist jedes Gefecht ein Gottesgericht; *marbilang* jemand Vorhaltungen machen; (...) *marbilanghon* (...) einen verfluchen, einem fluchen"

¹⁹ Chester Beatty Library, Dublin, No. 1146. *Ola pusuhndu erbilang-bilang nandangi nandéta si mupus* 'don't curse the mother that gave birth to us.'

‘miserable’ and *perliah* ‘a miserable person’ frequently occur in both of the manuscripts from the Bartlett collection (A Line 13, 24, B 11, 24).

All human suffering is ultimately caused by one’s fate (*pengindo*), which in most cases is not good (*la mehuli*). According to Karo mythology the still unborn is in the seventh month of pregnancy asked by *dibata* ‘God’ to choose its own fate by picking one of the leaves of the tree of life where the person’s fate is inscribed. After selecting the leaf of fate the person is asked seven times to confirm that this is the desired fate, and is given the opportunity to select a different leaf. *Pengindo* is thus not something that is prescribed by higher nature but something requested (*mindu*) by each individual. Other synonyms for *pengindo* also point to the self-determination of one’s fate: *pudun* ‘agreement’ or *jandi* ‘promise’. Fate is thus literally ‘something that has been requested’. The Karo say that children cry after being born because they already regret what they have requested.

According to a legend a person once complained to *dibata* why he had been given such a miserable fate. God listened to him and gave him the chance to change his fate. God created him again, and in the seventh month of pregnancy *dibata* asked him what fate he would like to choose this time. He chose precisely the same fate that he had already chosen the first time!

Transliteration and Translation of Mss. A and B

Manuscript A

Transliteration 1

1. maka hiyo hari kuté bilaṅ-bilaṅ nu buluh
2. minak héda si mula-mula tubuh ni ba
3. bo taneḥ mekapal héda ni teruh lañit
4. si miko Iko héda lako nisurati ma
5. ma hanak sibirinḥ mergana héda nuri
6. nuriken peñido la mehuli ma
7. ka la muhuli niku haku nibu
8. waṅ buah hanakberu seninaku hi
9. taneḥ sukapirinḥ dadé haminna muwaṅ
10. pé hiya labo rekité kitéken hu
11. taṅ kupasañ rekité kitéken haku
12. la beluh nibañ nibañi hukurna
13. héda dalanna muwaṅ seninaku hédim
14. ---perban haku liyaḥ kal ka
15. haku dubé rejudi kutataki ku
16. sipati duñari teraṅ kutera deñ

17. ña maka mehuli diya maka mehu
18. li mama di bagi héda hutaŋku pi
19. cetna mama bagé ka me nina anak
20. -sibirij mergana ñataken kata
21. man hanak karo karo mergana si
22. tegu kudaté heñkahé bagé me
23. nina hanak karo karo mergana ñata
24. ken kata hé maka heñkahé seḥ pé
25. jahé kuda la ka ñe dat kudana da
26. dé hi jé maka naktak hiluḥ hanak
27. sibirij mergana I ja kin pé te
28. -ridaḥ liyaḥku naté hanak sibi
29. rij mergana di kalak heñka
30. hé tadaḥ lako hecari di mama hanak
31. sibirij mergana tadaḥ lako si
32. raḥ ras hanak nipupus tañar
33. kin bégu si heñgo maté héda
34. kucibalken belo dat kal
35. kudaku héda nina hanak sibirij
36. mergana maka hanak gitij mer
37. gana ñataken kata man mama ha
38. nak sibirij mergana tegu
39. kuda éna naken nina hanak gi
40. tij mergana. la né tertegu
41. -naken hutaŋku belaḥ nina

Transliteration 2

1. Maka io ari kuté bilang-bilang nu buluh minak énda
2. si mula-mula tubuh ni babo tanéh mekapal énda
3. ni teruh langit si mingko-ingko énda
4. lako nisurati mama anak Simbiring mergana énda
5. nuri-nuriken pengindo la mehuli
6. Maka la mehuli ningku
7. aku nibuang-buang anakberu-seninaku
8. i tanéh Sukapiring ndadé
9. Aminna muang pé ia
10. labo erkité-kitéken utang kupasang
11. erkité-kitéken aku la beluh nimbang-nimbangi ukurna énda
12. dalanna muang seninaku
13. édim perban aku liah kal ka aku ndubé erjudi

14. Kutaktaki kusipati dungari terang.
15. "Kutera dengnga maka mehuli ndia, maka mehuli, mama,
16. di bagi énda utangku picetna, mama"
17. bagé ka me nina anak Sembiring mergana
18. ngataken kata man anak Karo-Karo mergana
19. "Sitegu kudanté ngkahé"
20. bagé me nina anak Karo-Karo mergana ngataken kata.
21. É maka ngkahé seh pé jahé kuda
22. la ka nge dat kudana ndadé
23. I jé maka naktak iluh anak Simbiring mergana.
24. I ja kin pé teridah liahku naté anak Simbiring mergana
25. di kalak ngkahé tandang lako ncari
26. di mama anak Simbiring mergana tandang lako sirang ras anak nipupus
27. Tangar kin bégu si enggo maté:
28. Énda kucibalken belo
29. dat kal kudaku énda
30. nina anak Simbiring mergana.
31. Maka anak Ginting mergana ngataken kata
32. man mama anak Simbiring mergana:
33. "Tegu kuda éna nangkeng"
34. nina anak Ginting mergana.
35. "La né tertegu nangkeng, utangku belang" nina.

Translation

1. This is a lament written on oil bamboo,
2. that originally grew on this thick earth
3. under the wide-stretched sky
4. to be written by the son of the Sembiring clan
5. to tell about his ill fate.
6. Ill-fated, I say,
7. because I have been expelled by my people
8. in the district of Sukapiring.
9. The reason that they expelled me
10. was not because of my debts,
11. but because I was unable to weigh their thoughts
12. that's why they expelled me,
13. and because I had no luck in gambling.

14. I thought about it, I weighted it, now it is clear
15. "How can it become good, uncle"
16. When I am pressured by my gambling debts?"
17. said the son of the Sembiring clan,
18. to the son of the Karo-Karo clan.

19. "Let's bring our horses downstream",
20. said the son of the Karo-Karo clan.
21. So we went down, and the horses reached the downstream country
22. but then the horses disappeared.

23. There the son of the Sembiring clan shed his tears,
24. wherever I go, I will be ill-fated, thought the son of the Sembiring clan,
25. other people go downstream in order to earn a living
26. but I go in order to become separated from my children.

27. "Listen, you ancestor spirits:"
28. "Here is my betel offering."
29. I got my horses back,
30. said the son of the Sembiring clan.

31. So the son of the Ginting clan said
32. to the son of the Sembiring clan::
33. "Bring your horses back to the highlands",
34. said the son of the Ginting clan.
35. "I can't bring them back to the highlands, because my debts are too many" I said.

Notes

- 3 Other manuscripts often include after this another extension of the opening formula, e.g. "it (the bamboo) was slashed by the son of the N.N. clan to become a tobacco container" (cf. Ms. B).
- 14 *Sipat* is the amount of time left before one dies. *Sipati* is not listed in any dictionary, but informants assured me that it is used synonym to *ukuri* and *taktaki*. I assume that *sipati* literally means 'to measure something' (which is also one of the meanings of *taktaki*), and thus 'to weigh, think about, reflect, contemplate'.
- 25 The meaning of *ncari* is to earn a living by working regularly as a trader, merchant, or as an employee, but not through working in the field. During the second half of the 19th century the Malay east coast of the sultanates of Deli and Langkat was transformed into a huge plantation belt nicknamed the Dollar Land. The indigenous people (Karo and Malay) refused to work on the plantations as indented laborers (for which Chinese and Javanese coolies were imported) but were readily available as craftsmen building tobacco sheds etc.
- 27 The word *tangar* 'listen!' is exclusively used in the evocation of spirits.
- 35 Another spelling convention is that the diphthong /ai/ is usually rendered as *é* as here in *né* (=nai). Compare also Ms. B line 11, 24, 27, and 29. Another example is *apé* (=apai) in line 10 of Ms. B.

Manuscript B : Michigan Museum of Anthropology No. 48466

Transliteration 1

1. maka Iyo bilan bilanj nu buluh belaké lako nitabah
2. hanak karo karo mergana man tuldak turanj beru tarigan
3. --maka tergemmes kal kamu herlajar bayu relajar
4. retenun ho turanj beru tariganku turi turiyanna si maka bagé niku tah re
5. -kité kitéken bekas turanj relajar bayu narij pé papagi maka jupan hanakberu
6. seniku di lahanj hejgo kal me kidah anakberu seninaku muwanj muwanj maka hem
7. pak hapé kal ne pé diya papagi perdalan hanak karo karo mergana si togal senina
8. si perliyah la né terralaj héda ho silih si noØgé surat kataku maka Ula kal kamu
9. megelut ho silih si nogé kata nu surat bekas nurati pé kidah buwé labo ma
10. ta hé kal me man beluhan nuri nurikenca man turanj beru tarigan hanak
11. si nuda turi turiyanna si Ø manca bagé niku bahan hejgo kal me kidah si ka
12. rahaban Ø kami turanjdu bagi supamana pergatuj hendek hendek ciger U
13. wari bana dagina gatuj giya nita la kidah retinali dagina cibal giya nita la kidah
14. relibas daji bagé ka kin me kidah si karahØbaban hanak karo karo mer
15. gana si perliyah la né teralaj héda ho turanj maka di héda la né kal ne kuwaka
16. lolo Ø Ø la né sudat la mabur perdalan kami turanjdu lako nadañi ta
17. neh nageri nu jahé jahé kerañen la né reduru dadé ho turanj kernana ni jé Ø
18. kal ne nenca kepuluñan si terbaba penido la mehuli ho turanj beru
19. -tariganku turi turiyenna si manca bagé ni dagina di rutuk ru
20. -tuk nu pirak buntar hemmas megersi lit ka ne kepulu
21. nenna ni bas perpadayane ho turanj di perdalanku mabur héda ni
22. ja ka ne diya pagi lit kepuluñanna ho turanj beru tarigan kaku hanak si nu
23. da héda kata

Transliteration 2

1. Maka io bilang-bilang nu buluh belangké
2. lako nitabah anak Karo-Karo mergana
3. man tuldak turang beru Tarigan
4. maka tergemmes kal kamu erlajar bayu, erlajar ertenun
5. O turang beru Tariganku
6. Turi-turinna si maka bagé ningku
7. tah erkité-kitéken bekas turang erlajar bayu naring pé papagi
8. maka jumpan anakberu-seni[na]ku
9. di lahang enggo kal me kidah anakberu-seninaku muang-muang
10. maka empak apé kal nge pé ndia papagi perdalan anak Karo-Karo mergana
11. si tonggal senina si perliyah la né teralang énda

12. O silih si ngogé surat kataku
13. maka ula kal kamu megelut
14. O silih si ngogé kata nu surat
15. bekas nurati pé kidah bué
16. labo mata é kal me man beluhen nuri-nurikenca
17. man turang beru Tarigan, anak si nguda

18. Turi-turinna si manca bagé ningku
19. bahan enggo kal me kidah si karababan kami turangndu
20. bagi sumpamana pergantung endek-endek ciger uari bana
21. dagina gantung gia ninta la kidah ertinali
22. dagina cibal gia ninta la kidah erlimbas dagi
23. bagé ka kin me kidah si karababan anak Karo-Karo mergana
24. si perliah la né teralang énda
25. O turang

26. Maka di énda la né kal nge kuakap lolo
27. la né sundat la mambur perdalan kami turangndu
28. lako nandangi taneh nu jahé
29. kerangen la né erduru ndadé
30. O turang

31. Kernana ni jé kal nge ngenca kepulungen
32. si terbaba pengindo la mehuli
33. O turang beru Tariganku

34. Turi-turinna si manca bagé ni[ngku] dagina
35. di runtuk-runtuk nu pirak bentar emas megersi[ng]
36. lit ka nge kepulungenna ni bas perpandén
37. O turang
38. di perdalanku mambur énda
39. ni ja ka nge ndia pagi lit kepulunganna
40. O turang beru Tarigan ka[ta]ku anak si nguda énda kata...

Translation

1. This is a lament on *belangké* bamboo
2. slashed by the son of the Karo-Karo clan
3. to become a shuttle for my sister of the Tarigan clan
4. so that you will love to learn how to plait, how to weave
5. O my sister of the Tarigan clan

6. I say this because
7. the product of your plaiting might become the bridge
8. where my people will meet
9. if not, I see that my people will expel me
10. and were then shall I go, the son of the Karo-Karo clan
11. the only child, the most unlucky person

12. O friend, who reads the letters of my words
13. don't take offence
14. O friend, who reads the letters of my words
15. much is, I see, that I wrote
16. not the eyes [but] I have to be able to tell it
17. to the sister of the Tarigan clan, the youngest child

18. The reason why I say this is
19. because I can see the burden that I, your brother, have to carry
20. it's like the shimmering heat that is hanging in the middle of the day
21. we can't say it hangs since there is no rope to see
22. we can't say it lays because it does not leave any trace
23. this is, I see, the burden that the son of the Karo-Karo clan has to carry
24. the most unlucky person
25. O sister

26. So there was no other way
27. it was inevitable that I, your brother, had to leave
28. traveling to the downstream land
29. passing through the endless forest
30. O sister

31. Because that is the place where all those meet
32. who carry ill fate
33. O my sister of the Tarigan clan.

34. The reason why I say this, is that
35. small parts of white silver and yellow gold
36. will be gathered by the goldsmith
37. O sister
38. when I have to wander far
39. will there be a place to settle?
40. O sister of the Tarigan clan, say I, the youngest child.

Notes

- 1 It is a rare occurrence that the opening formula is reduced to *maka io* only.
- 4 I have translated *bayu* as “plait”, i.e. “weave a mat” , and *ertenun* as “weave”, i.e. weave textiles.
- 38 Lit. “as far as my over-flown journey is concerned.”

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