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Introduction

The first time I became acquainted with parts of the story of a person called Saunat was in 1984. He is a mythical hero of an Asmat subgroup living on the river Fayit in the southern area of the Asmat region. His memory is awakened by singing his story. This is sometimes practised during a sago feast or when it is quiet in the village because many inhabitants are out. It could well be that many of the men have gone into the jungle to harvest sago and to hunt or go fishing (de Antoni 2010¹: 108).

During a stay in Basim in 1984, I was offered the opportunity to make a tape recording of a song dealing with some of the adventurous experiences Saunat was said to have had². It was sung to the accompaniment of drumming by men from Naneu, a village further upstream along the Fayit. In the area of this river the Kaweinag language is spoken (de Antoni 2010¹: 41).

Years later, in July and August 2007, a transcription and the translation of the song-texts were made in Basim. The results of the attempts to achieve these renditions of the recorded texts are documented here. The text of the stanzas of the song is rendered in a Kaweinag transcription and in two translations, into Indonesian and finally English.

¹ de Antoni, Alexander (2010). *Dugout to the Other Side: Social structures inscribed in mythic tales and cosmological concepts of the Asmat*. Göttingen: Cuvillier.

² The audio recordings of the mythic song are stored in form of a digital copy in the 'Phonogrammarchiv der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften' (PhAÖAW, Wien 1., Liebiggasse 5) together with other recordings in the collection 'Sammlung: de Antoni: West Papua 1984'. The recordings of the Saunat-song can be found under the following archive numbers: stanzas 1-11: D6680; stanzas 12-15: D6679; stanzas 16-29: D6678.

It may be seen as confusing that such a large number of translation variants is reproduced here. However, on closer examination, this form of representation may reveal new insights. As part of a comparative study of the various translations either one or the other turns out to be more a commentary on the original sung text than a translation. Identified as such, these sentences will prove to be of crucial help in interpreting the song and therefore to an authentic understanding of it. This fact represents a major reason for juxtaposing the diverse variants of the translation in a comparative form as is done here. In their diversity the versions contribute to a contextual understanding of the complete lyrics.

The text dealt with here corresponds to that used as a main source in my book 'Dugout to the Other Side'. In that paper it was entitled text '1b' (de Antoni 2010¹: 61-87).

In the rendering of the representations of the text in the following chapter (2 - Text of the Saunat song), every line of the stanza of the song is reproduced in three versions as illustrated in the following explanatory note:

^x *Transcription of the text of the song in the Kaweinag language made by Lukas Bayua from Biopis*

^x Translation into Indonesian by Mateus Akin from Basim [Translation into Indonesian by Lukas Bayua] [Translation into Indonesian worked out by Lukas Bayua a few days after the previous translation (L.)] [Translation into Indonesian made by Petrus³ from Basim (P.)] [Translation into Indonesian by an unknown translator assisted by Bavo Felndity⁴ (?)]

^x Translation of the Indonesian translation into English [Translation of the Asmat transcription of Lukas or of his Indonesian translation into English made by Lukas Bayua in collaboration with Bavo Felndity] [Translation of the later Indonesian translation of Lukas into English (L.)]

For a more detailed contextual description of the texts and their producers see my book (de Antoni 2010¹: 49-59).

³ Petrus is a boat-driver for Bavo Felndity, parish priest in Basim. Felndity wrote down the text as translated by Petrus.

⁴ Bavo Felndity is Roman Catholic diocesan parish priest in Basim. He comes from the Tanimbar Islands and is therefore familiar with the Indonesian dialect spoken in these eastern parts of the country. He also speaks good English.

Working on the transcription of the song-text and the translations in 2007 in Basim, the collaborators expressed quite a number of remarkable comments. Together with remarks to the translation, these have been added to the text as notes in parentheses. In addition, question marks enclosed in brackets were inserted to mark questionable translations.

Alternative spellings of proper names as well as of animal species in the Asmat texts are reproduced in the translations according to the way they were spelled by the authors in the manuscripts. These original spellings could be of linguistic importance. They may possibly reveal clues to the local pronunciation of the expressions. “For example the apparently equivalent usage of Y and J as initials of proper names” (see Saunat 28:15,17,22) makes a more accurate reconstruction of the local pronunciation of these names possible. In this case, it could well be that the ‘Y’ is used to refer to the English consonantal allophone of this letter. Then writing ‘J’, the Dutch way of indicating the same pronunciation is addressed. In both cases, the pronunciation is the same. Consequently, a pronunciation of the name corresponding to that of ‘Y’ in the English word ‘year’ would be obvious.

Asmat are hardly very familiar with orthographic rules. In general, spelling as practised here is the result of adaptations to individual pronunciations and local writing customs (de Antoni 2010¹: 59).