

An analysis of the Mantra Muttered at Melanau *Kaul* Sea Rite and its association with the coastal Ecology

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ABSTRACT

In Sarawak (Malaysia), Melanau ethnic is the coastal dweller. In concordance with their living environment, they inherited and have been practicing *Kaul* or sea rite until the present day. The purpose of this ceremony is to pray for a good and blessed fishing season. During the ceremony, the principal performer (*Bapak Kaul*) will mutter *Kaul* mantra to “convey” the villagers’ wishes to the sea spirits or *Ipok*. This study attempts to analyze the contents of the mantra and its association with the coastal environment. The analysis found that the mantra is constructed in a systematic way with the parts of “opening words”, “appeasing the spirits with foods” and “conveying their requests”. Since Melanau is a coastal dweller, the content of the mantra inevitably closely related with the coastal ecology, particularly the types of worshiped spirits. This study also found that the *Kaul* mantra is constructed esthetically.

Key words : Coastal Ecology, Melanau, Mantra, Structure, Esthetics

Introduction

Mukah is a small township located in the coast of Sarawak, Malaysia; see Figure 1. In this township, Melanau are the majority ethnic group. The distribution area of this ethnic group is rather broad and covers the area of Oya, Dalat, Seduan, Matu, Daro and Balingian. In terms of language variation, Melanau people speak the variations that neither related to the Dayak nor the Malay languages (Chou, 2002). In terms of population, according to *The Yearbook of Statistics Sarawak 2015*, the total population of Melanau is approximately 19,000 people. Based on religion belief, the Melanau can be divided into Christian Melanau and Mohammedans Melanau. The term *Kaul* refers to the ceremony of sea spirits or *Ipok* worshiping and it is carried out annually in the month of April. This rite has been

inherited for generations by the Melanau community; see Awang & Jeniri (2001). This belief, which is the annual necessity for them, begins with the announcement of the actual day by *Bapak Kaul* or the leader of *Kaul* (after a meeting held among the village heads). A few days prior to the *Kaul* ceremony, all the villagers begin to make preparations like decorating boats, cooking meals, etc. In the morning of the *Kaul*, they begin to row their boats down to the estuary, gather at the seaside by bringing along their own foods. At the initial praying stage, foods such as two colours of glutinous rice—yellow and white, sago, rice, salt, cigarettes, traditional snacks and betel-nuts will be put at the *Serahang*. *Serahang* is a divine object made from a 7-foot bamboo pole and several kinds of leaves and equipped with a flat round basket. The foods to appease the *Ipok* will be served in this basket; see Figure 2. After prepara-

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tions, the *Bapak Kaul* starts to mutter *Kaul* mantra in order to invite the sea spirits for the meals and convey the villagers' wishes. The mantra describes in this paper was provided by Mr. Salman bin Tuna, the *Bapak Kaul* from Telian Tengah village, Mukah. He has been appointed as the leader of *Kaul* since 2015.



Fig. 1. The Location of Mukah in Borneo Island (Source: Google Map)

The Theoretical Framework

In the study of mantras, various kinds of theories and approaches can be utilized. For example,



Fig. 2. The *Serahang* (Credit: Mr. Tommy Black, *Sapan Puloh Muzium, Mukah*)



Fig. 3. The Fishery Market in Mukah

Sabrina (2013) applied Firth's theory to analyze the Malay's mantra and Jasman (2015) who studied the mantra of the Bajau ethnic in Sabah was based on the theory of Phenomenology (by Schutz). In fact, most of the previous studies on mantra were from the perspective of anthropology or ethnology. In this paper, the authors will present a cross disciplinary approach to analyze the *Kaul* mantra practised by the Melanau, namely the structural and literature approach pioneered by Noriah Taslim (2010). In her study, Noriah Taslim found that the Malay mantra existed in a structured form and consisted of certain implicit sociological and literature elements. In other words, the mantras have their own language structures built by words or sound units. From sociological perspective, the structure of language is noticed functional and meaningful to the reference world as well as the spirit world. She also found that the verses were built with various literary technologies that consciously imply the "magical" power. Hence, the esthetic features such as metaphor, simile, and allusion (reference) are seen to appear in the mantra verses.

The Data

The following data is the verses of *Kaul* mantra muttered by Mr. Salman Tuna during the *Kaul* cer-

emony. The contextual meanings of the verses will be presented in the Data Analysis part.

VERSE 1: Tabik Datuk Tabik Melau Idei Ipuk, Meleu Nda Ta'au Adet, Meleu Nda Ta'au Petuwak, Meleu Nda Ta'au Bahasa Meleu Nda Ta'au Cara, Yen Tan Melew Bak Pedengah, Bak Gugga, Menggeta'au, Kelew Likau Dibak Kala.

VERSE 2: Ipuk Alud, Ipuk Daya, Ipuk Ba'au, Ipuk Dibak, Ipuk Ajok, Ipuk Abak, Ipuk Wab, Ipuk La'an, Ipuk Pegak, Ipuk Jakak, Ipuk Tanak, Ipuk Segala Ipuk, Keman Sama, Pamen Sama, Telau Idei Ipuk.

VERSE 3: Melew Menyabek, Rezeki Murah, Menyabek Doa Diak, Diak Apah, Diak Bi'yah. Padak Jadi Jekan, Payak, Bubuk Alud, Padak Jadi Jekan Daya, Padak Jadi Bunga Buak Bak Pebuak, Padak Jadi Kayau, Padak Jadi Lelamah, Padak Jadi Imun, Padak Jadi Kebun, Lubeng Likau, Lubeng Gu'un, Lubeng Talun, Padak Penok Nyirok, Penok Kilak, Penok Upak, Penok Tadek, Bak Kan Anek Sawa, Seaw Silau, Seaw Sikau, Seaw Isit, Seaw Umit, Seaw Ieasing, Seaw Sadieng, Seaw Nau Idei Ipuk, Wak Diak Juah Nau, Lagak Nau, Idok Nau Gak Melew, Wak Ja'at, Nuwet, Padak Pepieng Pegalieng, Jauk Kak Petemu, Kak Pejumpak Wak Nda Pidah, Nda Diak, Pelating Pesiling Jauk.

VERSE 4: Keman Melo Ipuk, Keman Pamen Telo Ipuk, Keman Sama, Pisak Sama

VERSE 5: Puk..a..a..a..a..a..a..a..a..a..a

The Structure of *Kaul* Mantra

In terms of structure, the mantra of *Kaul* begins with a greeting verse dedicated to the sea spirit or *Ipok*:

Tabik Datuk, Tabik Melau Idei Ipuk
(Our respectful greetings to *Ipok*)

Subsequently, the *Bapak Kaul* expresses his courtesy by asking for forgiveness from the *Ipok*. The following excerpted verses indicate his politeness or courtesy when "inviting" the *Ipok* to the ceremony.

Meleu Nda Ta'au Adet, Meleu Nda Ta'au Petuwak, Meleu Nda Ta'au Bahasa, Meleu Nda Ta'au Cara

(Please forgive us for all the misbehavior)

After that, there are verses that consist of the sea spirits that will be invited, for example the spirits of the sea, land, rivers, roads etc.:

Ipuk Alud, Ipuk Daya, Ipuk Ba'au, Ipuk Dibak, Ipuk Ajok, Ipuk Abak, Ipuk Wab, Ipuk La'an, Ipuk Pegak, Ipuk Jakak, Ipuk Tanak, Ipuk Segala Ipuk

(Spirit of the sea, the land, the sky, the rivers (upstream, downstream and riverbanks), the east and

the west, the roads, etc)

Later, these *Ipoks* will be "invited" to have meals served in *Serahang*:

Keman Sama, Pamen Sama, Telau Idei Ipuk
(Come and have some meals)

After inviting the *Ipoks* for meals, *Bapak Kaul* begins to convey the villagers' wishes. He hopes the spirits can bless the villagers with prosperity and a better life in the new season:

Melew Menyabek, Rezeki Murah, Menyabek Doa Diak, Diak Apah, Diak Bi'yah. Padak Jadi Jekan, Payak, Bubuk Alud, Padak Jadi Jekan Daya, Padak Jadi Bunga Buak Bak Pebuak, Padak Jadi Kayau, Padak Jadi Lelamah, Padak Jadi Imun, Padak Jadi Kebun, Lubeng Likau, Lubeng Gu'un, Lubeng Talun, Padak Penok Nyirok, Penok Kilak, Penok Upak, Penok Tadek, Bak Kan Anek Sawa, Seaw Silau, Seaw Sikau, Seaw Isit, Seaw Umit, Seaw Ieasing, Seaw Sadieng, Seaw Nau Idei Ipuk, Wak Diak Juah Nau, Lagak Nau, Idok Nau Gak Melew, Wak Ja'at, Nuwet, Padak Pepieng Pegalieng, Jauk Kak Petemu, Kak Pejumpak Wak Nda Pidah, Nda Diak, Pelating Pesiling Jauk.

(All the crops have a proper growth, have a good harvest in cultivations and fishery, have a prosperous life etc.)

After that, *Bapak Kaul* will reiterate the invitation (to have the meals) and close the mantra by muttering "puka... a... a... a..." (Literal meaning: 'Oh, Gods').

Keman Melo Ipuk, Keman Pamen Telo Ipuk, Keman Sama, Pisak Sama, Puk..a..a..a..a..a..a..a

(Oh, gods, we sincerely invite you to have meals and play together)

The structure of the *Kaul* mantra can be summarized in the chart below:

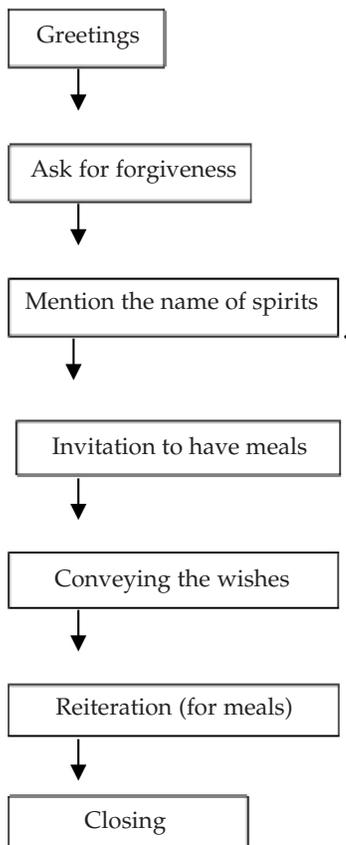
The Esthetic Elements

There are five esthetic elements found in the mantra of *Kaul*, namely allusions, anaphora, repetition, epistrophe and hyperbole:

Allusions

Based on the definition by Cambridge Dictionary, *allusion* is defined as "something that is said or written that is intended to make you think of a particular thing or person". The verse cited in the example below indicates implicitly "the villagers hope that they will have a prosperous and better life in the new season".

Padak Jadi Jekan, Payak, Bubuk Alud, Padak Jadi



Jekan Daya, Padak Jadi Bunga Buak Bak Pebuak, Padak Jadi Kayau, Padak Jadi Lelamah, Padak Jadi Imun, Padak Jadi Kebun

(All the crops have a proper growth, have a good harvest in cultivations and fishery, have a prosperous life etc.)

Anaphora

An anaphora is repeating a sequence of words at the beginning of neighboring clauses. In *Kaul* verse, this feature can be found in Example 1 and Example 2. In Example 1, the word *meleu* ‘we’ at the initial verse is repeated at the beginning of subsequence clause. Meanwhile in Example 2, it shows the repetition of the word *padak* ‘let to be sth’.

Example 1

Meleu Nda Ta’au Adet, **Meleu** Nda Ta’au Petuwak, **Meleu** Nda Ta’au Bahasa, **Meleu** Nda Ta’au Cara
(Please forgive us for all the misbehavior)

Example 2

Padak Jadi Jekan, Payak, Bubuk Alud, Padak Jadi Jekan Daya, Padak Jadi Bunga Buak Bak Pebuak, Padak Jadi

Kayau, Padak Jadi Lelamah, Padak Jadi Imun, Padak Jadi Kebun.

(All the crops have a proper growth, have a good harvest in cultivations and fishery, have a prosperous life etc.)

Repetition

Repetition is the using of a word or phrases intentionally for two or more times, within a short space of words for the purpose of to secure emphasis. In the following example, the word *keman* ‘eat’ is repeated by *Bapak Kaul* in order to stress he sincerity (i.e. appease the *Ipoks* with food and drinks).

Keman Melo Ipuk, Keman Pamen Telo Ipuk, Keman Sama, Pisak Sama
(Please come here. Eat, drink, and play with us.)

Epistrophe

In contrast with anaphora, epiphora is the repetition of words at the end of a sentence or phrase. According to Nurulain & Che Ibrahim (2016), epistrophe aims to emphasize the importance of certain meanings. The epistrophe found in *Kaul* verse (as example below) attempts to express the sincerity of *Bapak Kaul* invites the *Ipoks* to the ceremony.

Keman Sama, Pamen Sama, Keman Sama, Pisak Sama
(We eat and play together)

Hyperbole

Hyperbole refers to the using of exaggerated statements to show emphasis (of something). The example of hyperbole found in *Kaul* verse is:

Padak Jadi Jekan, Payak, Bubuk Alud, Padak Jadi Jekan Daya, Padak Jadi Bunga Buak Bak Pebuak, Padak Jadi Kayau, Padak Jadi Lelamah, Padak Jadi Imun, Padak Jadi Kebun, Lubeng Likau, Lubeng Gu’un, Lubeng Talun, Padak Penok Nyirok, Penok Kilak, Penok Upak, Penok Tadek

(All the crops have a proper growth, have a good harvest in cultivations and fisheries, have a prosperous life etc.)

In the example above, *Bapak Kaul* tries to convey their wishes to the *Ipok*. They hope that the *Ipoks* can bless them with good harvest in cultivations and fisheries, as well as bring prosperity to them. The use of the word *penok* ‘full of’ or other exaggerate wishes like “the boat will be loaded with fishes” are the examples of hyperbole elements in the mantra.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study found that the mantra mut-

tered in *Kaul* ceremony is constructed with a systematic structure, begins with a greeting to the spirits, followed by asking for forgiveness in advance, “inviting” them for meals, conveying their desires or wishes and an ending verse. In terms of the contents, the *Kaul* mantra exhibited several esthetical elements and each of the element plays certain pragmatic roles such as “to emphasize” or “to stress something”. In short, mantra is not only an intermediary medium between human and the spiritual world, it also is a kind of folk literature that immerged certain important literary knowledge.

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