



Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development

**ANALYSIS OF FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE IN IBAN ORAL
TRADITIONS: *BIAU***

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Bachelor of Education (Honours)

ESL

2009

P1
5333.1
J54
2009

BORANG PENYERAHAN TESIS

Judul: ANALYSIS OF FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE IN IBAN ORAL TRADITIONS: BIAU

SESI PENGAJIAN: 2006 – 2009

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& ALL LOVED ONES

Abstract

Figurative language in Iban oral traditions is significant to the Iban language and culture as a whole. This study delves into the conventions of *biau*, one of the many Iban oral traditions; the types of figurative language; and also the significance of figurative language to the Iban language and culture.

Abstrak

Bahasa kiasan dalam tradisi lisan masyarakat Iban memainkan peranan penting dalam bahasa Iban itu sendiri dan juga kebudayaan masyarakat Iban secara amnya. Kajian ini mengupas tentang ciri-ciri yang ada dalam biau, salah satu daripada tradisi lisan masyarakat Iban; jenis-jenis bahasa kiasan seperti yang terdapat dalam biau yang terpilih; dan juga kepentingan bahasa kiasan dalam bahasa Iban dan kebudayaan Iban.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank God Almighty for giving me the strength and the will-power to complete this final year project.

I would like to thank Ms. Yvonne Michelle Campbell, my supervisor for this final year project. All the guidance and support that have been given to me is deeply appreciated. May God bless her and grant her success in all her present and future undertakings.

I would like to thank the people of Tun Jugah Foundation who have given me the permission to use their library while doing the study. Their efforts in preserving Iban language as a whole is highly appreciated.

I also would like to thank all my informants, especially to Mr. Phillip Langie of Sri Aman and Mr. Sawing Bujang of Lubok Antu for being helpful during my research for the study. Their love for Iban language has inspired me to conduct the present study and future studies.

I would like to thank my fellow coursemate, Mr. Mathew Mensan Long, for lending me some of the rare Borneo Literature Bureau publications.

Lastly, but not the least, I would like to thank my family for being patient in putting up with me during the entire data collection. Thank you for everything.

Table of Content

Abstract		iii
Abstrak		iv
List of Tables		viii
Chapter 1	Introduction	1
	1.0 Chapter Overview	1
	1.1 Introduction	1
	1.2 Research Problem	4
	1.3 Aim and Objectives of the Study	5
	1.4 Significances of the Study	5
	1.5 Operational Definitions of Terms	6
	1.6 Scope of the Study	8
	1.7 Chapter Review	9
Chapter 2	Reviews of Related Literature	10
	2.0 Chapter Overview	10
	2.1 Oral Traditions From Around The World and Their Significance to Different Cultures and Communities	10
	2.2 Other Researches on Figurative Language in Iban Oral Traditions	12
	2.3 Chapter Review	12
Chapter 3	Research Methodology	13
	3.0 Chapter Overview	13
	3.1 Research Design	13
	3.2 Texts Selected For Analysis	14
	3.3 Data Collection Procedure	14
	3.4 Data Analysis	15
	3.5 Chapter Review	15
Chapter 4	Analysis of Figurative Language	16
	4.0 Chapter Overview	16
	4.1 Analysis of Conventions of <i>Biau</i>	16

4.2	Analysis of Figurative Language in <i>Biau</i>	34
4.3	Significances of Figurative Language in Iban Oral Traditions to the Iban Customs and Culture	47
4.4	Conclusion	48
4.5	Chapter Overview	49
Chapter 5	Conclusion	50
5.0	Chapter Overview	50
5.1	Contributions of the Study	50
5.2	Recommendations for Further Research	51
5.3	Conclusion	51
5.4	Chapter Review	52
	Bibliography	53
	Appendixes	55

List of Tables

Table 4.1	Order of Arrangement in <i>Biau</i>	16
Table 4.2	Types of Figurative Language	34
Table 4.3	Types of <i>Jaku Dalam</i>	34
Table 4.4	Figurative Language in <i>Biau Pengabang Melah Pinang</i>	35
Table 4.5	Figurative Language in <i>Biau Pengabang Gawai Pangkung Tiang</i>	37
Table 4.6	Figurative Language in <i>Leka Biau Orang Ti Baru Jadi Melaki Bini</i>	39
Table 4.7	Figurative Language in <i>Biau Pengabang Gawai Betawai</i>	40
Table 4.8	Figurative Language in <i>Biau Anak Mit Gawai Betawai</i>	44

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Chapter Overview

This chapter will discuss oral traditions from cultures around the world and their significance, the research problems, the aims and objectives of the study, the significances of the study, operational definition of terms, and the scope of the study.

1.1 Introduction

Many of the world's known languages exist without any writing system whatsoever, and many more make limited use of writing (Pyer-Pereira, n.d.). In such societies, the performance of a culture's spoken interactions necessarily takes on an entirely different shape. Culturally important traditions, histories and beliefs are kept alive in human memories (ibid). These traditions take the form of sayings, proverbs, songs, and epic stories. They are relayed from one generation to the next through oral/aural means, finding homes in countless memories over the years.

According to Pyer-Pereira (n.d.), these traditions exist not merely as entertainment, but contain culturally important advice. Oral traditions provide

suggestions for solving typical societal problems, or ways to become reconciled to those problems that seem insoluble (Lord, 1995; IN: Pyer-Pereira, n.d.). They exist as a major store of accumulated cultural knowledge. As such, they are invaluable sources of information about the societies that tell them.

It is through the oral tradition of a culture that we can perceive its soul (Appell, 2001). Oral tradition is a way for a society to transmit history, literature, law and other knowledge across generations without a writing system; a set of criteria specifies material held in common by a group of people, over several generations. In a general sense, “oral tradition” refers to the transmission of cultural material through vocal utterance. Appell (2001) said that through oral traditions that a society can maintain its roots to the past as well as its dignity.

The ancient Hawaiian people kept no written records. Yet they lived with a sophisticated hierarchical system of land divisions, a complex classification in ranks from commoner to highest chief, and a detailed genealogy. To keep track of this vital knowledge, any transition that might be of importance, either to others or to future generations had to be memorised and passed on. Each of the Hawaiian islands held on to its own lineage chants linking its chiefs to the realm of the gods, the origins of humanity, and the ancestry of the Hawaiian people. The most famous lineage chant of all, the one that was preserved and recorded intact, was the *kumulipo*. The *kumulipo* is most often described as the Hawaiian creation chant composed as a cosmogonic genealogy, unfolding from the beginning of time to the 18th century. At first sight, the *kumulipo* appears as a sacred and detailed creation story, describing the actual history of life on earth from its beginning to the birth of the child it was dedicated to. But underneath it linger immediate, political implications determined by the rank of the chiefs named. The *kumulipo* enhanced the prestige and fortified the political bid for power of the family to which it belonged by using ancient cosmogonic beliefs and linking names to the gods.

The oral tradition of the Baloch belongs to an ethnic group speaking a northwest Iranian language called Balochi and inhabiting Balochistan, a country now divided among Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan. Oral tradition has been very important for the Baloch as an ethnolinguistic group. It served them as their

history when there was no written history in their language. It was also the record of their cultural values, a mark of their identity, a guideline for the younger generation, and a check on their behaviour and way of conduct.

The Ifugao *hudhud* chants from the Philippines have existed in an almost unchanged state since at least the 7th century CE (Dulawan, 2001; IN: Pyer-Pereira, n.d.). The *hudhud* chants, a series of over 200 chants, descended from one original chant (Dulawan, 2001; IN: Pyer-Pereira, n.d.). The traditional *hudhud* serves at least three functions in Ifugao society. The first is that of a labour song, serving to keep all the harvesters at work in unison. The second relates to the belief that the singing of the *hudhud* while harvesting traditional varieties of rice will spur a miraculous growth of the crop. The final function of the *hudhud* relates to gender. In earlier times, the Ifugao practiced headhunting as a way to solve vengeance cases, and the male epics of this and similar cultures tend to revolve around themes of violence and killing (Pyer-Pereira, n.d.). The female epic chants were believed to produce peaceful solutions to long-standing inherited resentment and vengeance.

The *darangen* is an ancient epic song that encompasses a wealth of knowledge of the Maranao people who live in the Lake Lanao region of Mindanao. Comprising 17 cycles and a total of 72,000 lines, the *darangen* celebrates episodes from Maranao history and the tribulations of mythical heroes. In addition to having a compelling narrative content, the epic explores the underlying themes of life and death, courtship, love and politics through symbol, metaphor, irony and satire. The *darangen* also encodes customary law, standards of social and ethical behaviour, notions of aesthetic beauty, and social values specific to the Maranao. To this day, elders refer to this time-honoured text in the administration of customary law.

Among the Ibans of Sarawak, the oral tradition includes all forms of information that are transmitted and learned orally. It is comprised of aphorisms (*jaku' sempama*), chants (*timang* or *pengap*), dirges or laments (*sabak*), fables and legends (*jerita* or *jerita tuai*), myths and sagas (*ensera*), motifs, prayers (*sampi*), proverbs (*jaku' dalam*), riddles (*entelah*), and songs (*renung semain*, *renung sabung*, *renung kayau*, *renung sugi*, and *wa'*) (Sather, 1994a:58-61). Equally

important for Iban oral traditions are the numerous genealogies (*tusut*) which serve to bind up Iban lore and world (cf. Sutlive, 1976:156-157; IN: Sather, 1994a:48).

Sadly, the practice of oral traditions among the younger generations of Ibans is dying out due to new religions – particularly, Christianity and Islam – as these traditional chants and rituals are in opposition with the teachings of these religions. The settings in which many oral forms were performed in the past are now disappearing and in many cases the younger generation is no longer able to understand the worldview, values and language reflected in traditional literary and ritual forms.

The same situation happened to the Ifugao. The conversion of the Ifugao to Catholicism has weakened their traditional culture. Furthermore, the *hudhud* is linked to the manual harvesting of rice, which is now mechanised. Nowadays, the *darangen* is less frequently performed owing in part to its rich vocabulary and archaic linguistic forms, which can only be understood by practitioners, elders and scholars. Indeed, the growing tendency to embrace mainstream Filipino lifestyles may represent a threat to the survival of this ancient epic.

Among the native Hawaiian, while the *kumulipo* has been preserved, all the chants were an oral tradition. Only selected individuals memorised the long verses. Not performance-oriented, many of these were secret or only known to the aristocracy.

1.2 Research Problem

Appell (2001) states that Iban oral tradition is very fragile and remains in the memory of the elder generation, who are rapidly dying out. It will not survive under conditions of modernisation and education. Sather (n.d.) remarks on the decline in the numbers of ritual specialists, the erosion of ritual speech that has occurred since he began his research, and the fact that it is not possible to find interpretations for all the metaphors and words in the *pelian* texts he collected, for

that is now lost. The ritual poetry, either sung or spoken, creates incredibly beautiful, aesthetic performances, the loss of which will impoverish world culture.

With the loss of Iban oral traditions will cause the loss of the richness of Iban language. Gradually, no one especially the younger generation will understand the oral traditions of their forefathers and its significances to the Iban culture. Therefore, this research looks at the aesthetic and figurative language of the *leka main* in one of Iban oral traditions: *biau*.

1.3 Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study is to analyse the figurative language in a type of Iban oral tradition: *biau* (blessings). The study will focus on the figurative language – *jaku banding* (comparisons), *jaku dalam* (ritual speech), *jaku karung* (hidden meaning), *jaku kelaung* (euphemisms), *jaku sema* (simile), *jaku sempama* (metaphor) and *jaku silup* (insinuation) found in *biau*.

This study is to meet certain objectives. The first objective of this study is to analyse the conventions of *biau*. The second objective is to analyse the types of figurative language found in one particular type of Iban oral traditions, i.e. *biau*. And the third objective is to highlight the significance of figurative language in Iban oral traditions to the Iban customs and culture.

1.4 Significances of the Study

This study has several significances, particularly to Iban oral traditions. The first and foremost significance of this study is the conventions of *biau*. *Biau* has its own special conventions which have been passed down from one generation to the next generation through oral tradition as the Ibans formerly did not have writing conventions.

The second significance of this study is to preserve the Iban oral traditions and language by documenting it. Iban oral traditions remain in the memory of the elder generation, who are rapidly dying out (Appell, 2001:741-785). Furthermore,

oral traditions tend to express the core symbols and values of a culture and act as an important source of identity. The settings in which many oral forms were performed in the past are now disappearing and in many cases the younger generation is no longer able to understand the worldview, values and language reflected in traditional literary and ritual forms.

Lastly, but not the least, the significance of this study is appreciating the Iban oral traditions. According to Appell (2001:741-785), Iban oral literature is vast, incredibly beautiful, and very fragile. Embedded in the traditional chants, songs and stories are coded messages to the Iban beliefs, values and ways of life.¹

1.5 Operational Definition of Terms

1.5.1 Figurative Language

Figurative language is a language that deviates from the standard construction to achieve a special effect or makes use of figures of speech, such as simile, metaphor and hyperbole for comparing dissimilar objects (Muhammad Quayum & Rosli Talif, 1997). Figurative language states the facts with comparisons to similar events and some possible exaggerations. It is not intended to be interpreted in a literal sense. The intended meaning differs from the actual literal meaning of the words themselves (Braiman, 2007). It always makes use of a comparison between things. Figurative language compares two things that are different in enough ways so that their similarities, when pointed out, are interesting, unique and/or surprising.

¹ <http://www.tunjugahfoundation.org.my/oral.php>

1.5.1.1 *Jaku Karung*

Ibans' dislike of physical and sociological ambiguities is paradoxically balanced by their use of double entendre, proverbs, and riddles (*Encyclopaedia of Iban Studies*, 2001). Speech is informed and made interesting by the appropriate, clever, and timely use of *jaku karung*.

1.5.1.2 *Jaku Dalam*

Jaku dalam is 'deep speech', utterances that contain secondary or tertiary meanings not apparent from the mere syntax of the statement (*Encyclopaedia of Iban Studies*, 2001).

1.5.1.2.1 *Jaku Sema / Jaku Banding* (Similes)

Ibans compare and contrast virtually all parts of their world (*Encyclopaedia of Iban Studies*, 2001). The use of analogical and homological reasoning, as processes common to all people, has resulted in the creation of numerous aphorisms, proverbs, and similes. These language-art forms abound in the Iban language, and enrich and inform speech at all levels and in all contexts.

1.5.1.2.2 *Jaku Sempama* (Metaphors)

Jaku sempama are aphorisms, parables, and proverbs (*Encyclopaedia of Iban Studies*, 2001).

1.5.1.2.3 *Jaku Kelaung / Jaku Silup* (Euphemisms)

Jaku kelaung (euphemisms) or ‘circuitous language’ is used to make a play on words by inverting syllables or by using euphemisms (*Encyclopaedia of Iban Studies*, 2001). It is widely used by older Iban generation and rural Ibans to show sensitivity towards others’ feelings, good manners and also to avoid words which can harm a person or bring trouble.

1.5.2 Oral Traditions

Oral tradition is a way for a society to transmit history, literature, law and other knowledge across generations without a writing system; a set of criteria specifies material held in common by a group of people, over several generations. In a general sense, “oral tradition” refers to the transmission of cultural material through vocal utterance. These traditions take the form of sayings, proverbs, songs, and epic stories. They are relayed from one generation to the next through oral/aural means, finding homes in countless memories over the years.

1.5.3 *Biau*

Biau literally means to wave a cockerel over someone’s head for good luck at a ceremony (Sutlive, 1994:42). As the cock is waved, often over guests’ heads, a supplication is made that if there are spirits who have followed the guests to the festival, may they be satisfied with the sacrifice of the cock.

1.6 Scope of the Study

The scope of the study for the analysis of figurative language will be limited to only one type of Iban oral tradition: *biau*. The study will focus on *biau*. There

are many other types of Iban literature such as *pengap*, *sabak*, *pelian*, *ramban*, *sampi*, *sugi*, *renong*, *pantun*, etc., but this study will not look at these types of Iban oral traditions. The study will focus on the *biau* of the Saribas Ibans in Betong Division, Sarawak. And this study might not represent the *biau* of other areas and other Iban dialects. The study will analyse the published versions of *biau* as found in several books published by the Borneo Literature Bureau in the 1960s and 1970s.

1.7 Chapter Review

This chapter has discussed at a glance the Iban oral traditions. This background knowledge of Iban oral traditions, particularly *biau*, will become the basis for the whole study. The issues raised in this chapter will be discussed further in the forthcoming chapters. Next chapter will discuss the literature review related to this study.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEWS OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.0 Chapter Overview

This chapter will emphasise on figurative language as found in Iban oral traditions, particularly those that are found in *biau*. This chapter will also review previous researches on figurative language in Iban oral traditions.

2.1 Oral Traditions from Around the World and Their Significance to Different Cultures and Communities

Among the Ifugao community of the highlands of the northern island of the Philippine archipelago, narrative chants called Hudhud are traditionally performed. It is practised during the rice sowing season, at harvest time and at funeral wakes and rituals. Thought to have originated before the seventh century, the Hudhud comprises more than 200 chants, each divided into 40 episodes. A complete recitation may last several days. The chant tells about ancestral heroes, customary law, religious beliefs and traditional practices, and reflects the importance of rice cultivation. The language of the stories abounds in figurative expressions and repetitions and employs metonymy, metaphor and onomatopoeia, rendering transcription very difficult.

Meanwhile, among the Maranao people who live in the Lake Lanao region of Mindanao, the southernmost island of the Philippine archipelago, the ancient epic song called the Darangen encompasses a wealth of knowledge of the community. Comprising 17 cycles and a total of 72,000 lines, the Darangen celebrates episodes from Maranao history and the tribulations of mythical heroes. The Darangen also encodes customary law, standards of social and ethical behaviour, notions of aesthetic beauty, and social values specific to the Maranao. To this day, elders refer to this time-honoured text in the administration of customary law. Meaning literally “to narrate in song”, the Darangen existed before the Islamisation of the Philippines in the fourteenth century and is part of a wider epic culture connected to early Sanskrit traditions extending through most of Mindanao.

The ancient Hawaiians lived with a sophisticated hierarchical system of land divisions, a complex classification in ranks from commoner to highest chief, and a detailed genealogy.⁵ To keep track of this vital knowledge, any transition that might be of importance had to be memorised and passed on. To aid with memorising, a system of verses emerged which over the years developed into an ingenious art form. The verses were known as the ‘oli’ chants. They recorded the history of the land and the lineages of the aristocracy. The chants were crucial for the continuation of political, socio-economic, and ecological system of the Hawaiian world. One’s position in Hawaii depended on one’s rank, and one’s rank was determined by blood descent. The genealogy was often the only evidence of one’s ancestry. It linked a person to all the ancestors, and through this, one could show how much sacredness and royal blood had accumulated. Each of the Hawaiian islands held on to its own lineage chants linking its chiefs to the realm of the gods, the origins of humanity, and the ancestry of the Hawaiian people. The most famous lineage chant of all was the *kumulipo*. The *kumulipo* is most often described as the Hawaiian creation chant composed as a cosmogonic genealogy, unfolding from the beginning of time to the 18th century. Under the

⁵ Schweitzer, V.S. (1998). *Words of Power: Hawaiian Chants and Language*. Retrieved October 19, 2008 from <http://www.lbdcoffee.com>

surface meaning lie the hidden meaning, the *kaona*. The *kumulipo* appears as a sacred and detailed creation story, describing the actual history of life on earth from its beginning to the birth of the child it was dedicated to. But underneath it linger immediate, political implications determined by the rank of the chiefs named. The *kumulipo* enhanced the prestige and fortified the political bid for power of the family to which it belonged by using ancient cosmogonic beliefs and linking names to the gods.

2.2 Other Researches on Figurative Language in Iban Oral Traditions

Sather (2001:167-170) conducted a research on the *pelian* in the Saribas region. He discovered that the *leka pelian* move back and forth between *jaku dalam* or 'deep language' (a characteristic of rituals) and *jaku mabu* 'shallow language' of everyday speech. Deep language is sometimes archaic and is usually difficult to interpret, typically suggesting more reflective meanings than shallow language. Sather (2001:167) also claimed that some sections of the *leka pelian* cannot be understood even by the *manang* themselves. The words are said to represent spirit language (*jaku antu*) or the special language of the dead (*jaku Sebayau*) in which meanings are typically reversed (*tunsang*).

2.3 Chapter Review

This chapter has probed into related literatures on figurative language in Iban oral traditions. These will be the basis for analysing the figurative language in *biau*, one of the many types of Iban oral traditions, that have been identified earlier and the related literatures will be the source for comparison with the present study.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.0 Chapter Overview

This chapter will discuss the research methodology used in conducting this study. This chapter will also discuss the texts selected for analysis, instruments for data collection, data collection procedure, data analysis and the limitations of the study.

3.1 Research Design

The research design for this study is text analysis and it is qualitative in nature. A flexible approach was sought that could access, analyse and compare data from sources identified as potentially important to the research: the opinions and experiences of experts and local people in the field, and textual sources.

Both the nature of the research question and the nature of the data of interest appeared best suited to a qualitative research approach, which is “the analysis of words and images, rather than numbers” (Silverman, 2008:8) or a study that “yields... observations not easily reduced to numbers” (Babbie, 1992:285). This approach is suited to descriptive, rather than quantifiable data, and is suited to

interpreting “meanings” rather than directly observing and measuring “behaviour”.

3.2 Texts Selected for Analysis

Texts selected for analysis of metaphorical meanings in this study will be selected from one type of Iban oral tradition, namely, *biau*. The justifications of selecting this type of Iban traditional oral literature are:

- i) Even though this type of oral tradition is shorter than other types of Iban oral traditions, it is constituted of figurative language.
- ii) This type of oral tradition is the most commonly used during *gawai* and other rituals.
- iii) Even in published works, this type of oral tradition can be found among other types of traditional oral literatures.

3.3 Data Collection Procedure

For the purpose of this study, the researchers used two data collection strategies: document collection and interviews.

3.3.1 Document Collection

The researcher is using the document collection technique as there are materials which have been published in the form of books and articles. These materials will be obtained from Sarawak State Library, Sarawak Museum Journals, and Tun Jugah Foundation.

3.3.2 Interviews

For this method, researcher interviewed the informants formally. For validity and reliability reasons, researcher used the same list for all informants and then compared the outcomes. Researcher also compared the data collected through document collection.

3.4 Data Analysis

For the process of data analysis, the qualitative data are analysed descriptively. The analysis of figurative language in *biau* will be analysed by using the conventions of biau and also through the analysis of figurative language.

3.5 Chapter Review

This chapter has discussed the research methodology used in conducting this study. This chapter has also discussed the texts selected for analysis, data collection procedure and data analysis.