

# AN ETHNOMUSICOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE BELIA CEREMONY IN CENTRAL KALIMANTAN

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**Abstract:** Government policy that stipulates ailments be treated using only medical approaches that can be proven effective is causing traditional healing practices to come into doubt. Although a few community groups in Indonesia in general, and particularly in the interior of Central Kalimantan, still believe in and carry out traditional practices such as the *belian* ceremony as a means of healing, this is becoming increasingly threatened. This is partly due to pressure from outside parties to follow a modern way of life. Moreover, these groups firmly prohibit the holding of the *belian* ceremony because it is not compatible with the regulations of their dominant religion. However, it is important to investigate what is being carried out in such ceremonies and how these traditional healing practices work. The community of Siang Dayak in Central Kalimantan that still undertakes healing using the *belian* ceremony has carefully studied and developed this means of treatment and passed on the associated knowledge for generations. The traditional medicines used in the ceremony are usually derived from various types of leaf and certain plant roots as well as animal fat. The work of a *basi* is not easy because he must be prepared to lead the *belian* ceremony from three up until nine nights in a row, be knowledgeable in the science of the traditional medical ingredients and have memorized long manteras. Aside from this, a *basi* must have an excellent feel for music.

**Keywords:** Siang Dayak, *belian* ceremony and music.

Siang people, like other Dayak ethnic groups, believe in the presence of life after death. After a person dies, his or her soul begins its travel to a place called *rowulio*, a kind of purgatory, before finally arriving at heaven. The soul has the same form and face as in its previous life, but cannot be seen by the living ones.

However, the soul can still have a relationship with the living ones, for example through dreams or if called up by a magician or medium named *Basi* (shaman). There are not only good and helpful souls, but also bad spirits called *ontu* or ghosts. The *ontu* usually lives in a big tree, river, grave or mountains. This ghost spirit frequently disturbs humans. When this occurs, the Siang people hold a ceremony, at which they always serve ritual food as an offering to it. The good soul, on the other hand, usually lives around the house before leaving for heaven or *batang talla bulan* (Siang language).

Despite their logical and critical thought, mythological thought still plays an important role for Dayak ethnic groups in general and Siang people in particular, specifically when facing some unexplainable occurrence whilst working on the farm, making a fence to protect their plants from animal attack, or in formulating traditional medicine to cure a disease and so on. If an undertaking fails, they attribute it to mythology, as they believe failure is a punishment or disturbance from surrounding spirits, and that such spirits must be paid with a worship ceremony, for example the *belian* ceremony.

The *belian* ceremony itself is currently under threat due to several issues. The younger generation are generally not interested in learning the music and continuing the tradition. The influence of Christianity is having a negative effect in that the religion forbids use of the ceremony as a means of cure. The associated introduction of Western pharmaceuticals to treat

ailments has strongly influenced society, to the extent that many societal members favor their use over traditional medicine. There is a danger that the *belian* ceremony may become lost, and hence Siang society will also suffer the loss of the music associated with it, an aspect of the culture important to Siang identity.

I thus conducted a study to determine more about the *belian* ceremony from an ethnomusicological perspective. The purpose of this study was thus to describe the ethnography of the music of Siang society, which until now has remained unknown to outsiders. The goal of the study was based on the question: What do the Siang people think of the *belian* ceremony?

This research is related to earlier studies conducted on the music of the Dayak peoples, which were undertaken in East Kalimantan (1994-1995 - under the guidance of Prof Takashi Shimeda). The study reported here was undertaken in Central Kalimantan (Tanah Siang district) by myself as a sole researcher. In conducting the research, I obtained data from society members by observation, participation and from institutions of the Tanah Siang sub-district government, in addition to undertaking bibliographic research to supplement the data. Data obtained from the society were collected by interview with *basi*, the Head of traditional custom, the Head of the Kaharingan religion, kandan singers, a society pioneer, parents and youths. I also documented some photos and cassette recordings.

## **BELIAN CEREMONY**

Belian is a healing ceremony conducted by Siang people and some Dayak ethnic groups in the hinterland of Kalimantan, especially for those who embrace Kaharingan (one of the traditional religions there). This term is also used by some ethnic groups like the Maanyan and Ngaju people. In East Kalimantan, especially the Kenyah, Bahau and Kayan ethnic groups, *belian* is known as *dayung*. Some Dayak ethnic groups in West Kalimantan recognize it as *boboin*. Hudson used another term to name *belian*, that is *balian*, but he did not provide a clear explanation for it. On one hand, he defined *balian* as a work conducted by the ones who had ability in traditional scientific medicine. On the other hand, he defined it as one of the processes of healing ceremony (in Koentjaraningrat 1984:145-146). In any case, in this paper, I use two terms familiar to Orang Siang; I differentiate *belian* as a kind of healing ceremony; and *basi*, which refers to someone's work as a leader in a healing ceremony-*basi bakah* for men's *basi*, and *basi bawe* for women's *basi*. Furthermore, the Benuaq and Tunjung ethnic groups name it *pemeliatn*, which means a person who has expertise in traditional healing.

### **A *basi* reading a *mantera***

In the Tanah Siang sub-district, where 30% of the population embraces Hindu Kaharingan, there are at least 25 *basi* who can conduct the *belian* ceremony. Nevertheless, it is relatively difficult finding an opportunity to watch this ceremony in comparison with other ceremonies, as it is only carried out if a member of the community is ill and needs to be cured by a *basi*. In addition, in selecting a *basi* to conduct a *belian* ceremony, the *basi* must meet the following requirements:

- Be physically healthy
- Understand musical rhythm
- Be able to dance
- Be capable of entering a state of trance (a door to the spirit's world)

Senior *basi* can usually keep dancing for from three until a maximum of nine days, read magic formula and achieve a state of trance by the end of the ceremony. On the contrary, junior or beginner *basi* usually cannot continue for more than three days. Thus, among other requirements, sound physical condition is one of the most important qualities of a *basi*. Senior

*basi* can be distinguished from junior *basi* by the accessories they wear and the symbols on their uniform.

One example is a sign with a line shape seen on a *basi*'s arm: two parallel horizontal lines underneath distinguishes a junior *basi*, who still needs to learn more or who is in progress to learn to become a *basi*; while two horizontal lines with one vertical line above are usually adopted by senior *basi*, which mean a) He has the right to teach his knowledge to younger *basi*, and b) He is also willing to perfect his science.

A *basi* has a considerable task if one takes into account the wages he receives, for instance money to the value of 30,000 rupiah or approximately US\$4, a slice of pork, chicken flesh, one kilogram of sugar, a plate, a headband and a piece of iron. Nevertheless, the wages they receive are not usually viewed commercially, but valued no more than a prerequisite of custom as agreed upon by society. Although their tasks are carried out over a long period and are exhausting, *basi* carry them out gladly and without a feeling of burden. Liti, one of the *basi*, remarked that *belian* is a social task that has to be carried out by *basi* like himself or another *basi*. He believed that he would be punished by Mohotara or God if he was not willing to fulfill his role as a *basi* in *belian* ceremony.

## SONG AND MANTERA

Orang Siang recognize *belian dusun* more readily than any other type of *belian* such as *belian bawo*, *sentiu* or *dadas*. According to half of the Orang Siang in this recent generation, *belian dusun* came from the Dusun ethnic group as well as *belian bawo* and *belian sentiu*, which originate from the Bawo and Kutai ethnic groups (Coomans 1987:58). Rhyme or words read aloud in *belian dusun* by the *basi* are in the Dusun language, so they do not understand the meaning. This is also the case with songs of some Dayak ethnic groups, for example the *onam* song of the Aoheng ethnic group from the Mahakam river (East Kalimantan) and the *barung* song of the Ngaju ethnic group from the Kahayan river (Central Kalimantan). In general, the present generation does not recognize the meanings of these songs; only a limited number of people, especially from the old generation, sometimes understand their meanings. Some informants of this study are capable of singing these songs, namely: Rangka Beruk (65 years old, *barung* singer), Duling (100 years old, a *basi*), and Liti (70 years old, a *basi*). They noted that *barung*, *kandan* songs and *mantera* are in the *Sangiang* or *Singian* language, which is seldom used in daily conversation. There is a probability that *Sangian* language or God (in formal religion) is an ancient Dayak language expressing parables, specifically used in certain ceremonies.

### *Mantera*

Basically, the purpose of words uttered while expressing *mantera* is similar to that of the poems sung by *basi* in the *belian* ceremony. *Mantera* and *belian* songs are words intended for the gods surrounding them. However, as the forms in which they are presented differ, they will be discussed separately here.

According to most followers of formal religion, *mantera* are usually interpreted as words related to magical elements. The term "magic" is interpreted as contradictory action with religious tenet. They have a more suitable term to convey their words to God: *do'a*. In the English dictionary, *mantera* is defined as a magic formula, and *do'a* means to pray, so the two are distinctly different. But, the essences of *do'a* and *mantera* are used for similar purposes, they may be considered alike. The Christian and Islamic religions recognize *do'a*, while the Hindu Kaharingan are more familiar with *mantera*. Presumably the term *do'a* is derived from Arabic, and *mantera* is from Sanskrit. The term *mantera* is still used by Hindus and traditional believers of Java and Bali spiritualism. An example can be seen in *primbon* (divining manual) books explaining lucky day, therapy, supernatural powers, dream exegesis etc used as guidance for some people today. Most 'Sufi' of the Islamic religion use the term *wadzifah*, which is similar to

*mantera* (Moinuddin 1999:23). Among some ethnic groups in West Kalimantan, the term *do'a* is used in mass religious services in church, and *mantera* is also used at other times, for instance when preparing the land, as in the *gawai* ceremony (rice harvest).

Musical elements (melody, rhythm) are not considered in the expression of *mantera*, but rather, speech and concentration. The atmosphere is one of quiet when a *basi* is uttering a *mantera*. The situation is very different when the *basi* is singing, dancing or going into a trance; sometimes members or other participants make jokes. For example, during the ceremony at which I was present, when a *basi* asked for a drink (traditional whiskey) and the friend sitting beside me gave him a cup of beverage, the *basi* said something and everyone laughed. Afterwards, my friend who gave him the drink told me in fact that the *basi* was asking for *arak*, but he acted wrongly in giving him a cup of coffee. Actually, the friend had not witnessed a *belian* ceremony in a long time, since he was a Christian. Even his wife, who also accompanied me, said it was the first time she had watched a *belian* ceremony. She had only accompanied me because I was her guest. An example of a *mantera* expressed in the beginning of the *belian* is as follows:

*"Bies nulak pangumayan,  
Mangir silu laut danum  
ine nintai tuning saseko,  
Jawo jalang tomulong pusar tasik  
Tegemulang ampe pangumayan  
Ngantoi diang pamora nyikup dulang"*

### **Belian Song**

In addition to the musical instruments I have described above, in *belian* ceremonies, vocal music called *belian* song is also used. Actually, the essence of the poem content sung in *belian* is the same as that of the magic formula (*mantera*) discussed earlier. Magic formula (*mantera*) can be distinguished from song using a musicological definition. For example, in the early session of the ceremony, a *basi* person utters a *mantera* using speech alone; without consideration of musical elements, this is a magic formula-not a song. However, in the later session, the *basi* reads a magic formula with melody and rhythm, and hence this is a song. Certainly, we can recall that Gregorian chants have three forms of melody, i.e. *syllabi*, *neomatic* and *melismatic*. Some elements of melody sometimes appear in *belian* song or again in *kandan* and *barung* songs:

The melody of *belian* song can be considered simpler than that of *kandan* song. Below, I provide an example of a motif usually sung by a *basi* in the early session after reading *mantera* (as a signal to start the ceremony).

In this session, phrase elements are very clear, with motif 1 and 2 repeated, so that the melody is monotonous in character. At the end of the session, especially during the trance, such motifs are not heard anymore. The *basi* reads magic formulae (*mantera*), which are sometimes followed by melismatic melody.

## **MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS**

Music is one of the important requirements for holding a *belian* ceremony. The ceremony cannot be performed if one of the two requirements, ritual service and music, is not presented. The musical instruments used in *belian* ceremonies are as follows.

### *Gendeng*

*Gendeng* is a type of single-headed membranophone only used in *belian* ceremonies. Besides the *gendeng*, there are also two kinds of membranophone: *gandang tatau* and *gandang manca*. Both are usually played with several other musical instruments, such as *karantung* and

*kangkanong*, especially during the bone burial ceremony named *tiwah* (Ngaju language) or *wara* (Siang language).

Because the *gendeng* is short in size, about 30-50 cm in length and around 20-30 cm in diameter, it is also called a *gandang pendek* (short drum) or *gandang belian*. The *gendeng* is not struck using the hand as with the *gandang tatau* and *gandang manca*, but using two sticks made of rattan. To accompany the *belian* ceremony, three *gendengs* are played by three players and each player uses two sticks or striking tools.

Basically, the *gendeng* players are not professional musicians, but participants in the ceremony. Usually, the youths prefer to play the *gendeng* musical instrument; even without instruction, they will appear in the ceremony to replace other players if necessary. The ceremony itself is the only opportunity for the youths and children to listen, watch and learn to play *gendeng*. Such an experience is common in Siang society in events other than those intended for entertainment such as in the playing of the gong ensemble. Concerning the gong ensemble, I was shown the *kangkanong* musical instrument played by Herdiawan (20 years old) in Saripoi village. He was very skilled with this instrument and could play more than 10 compositions. When I asked him “Who taught you to play this *kangkanong* music instrument?”, he replied that he had no teacher, but had learnt from experience by watching and listening. This is certainly extraordinary, because not all players of this instrument can play as well as him, particularly those of his age.

### *Gendeng*

Returning to our discussion of the *gendeng*, this instrument is relatively simple to play. The three types of *gendeng* are played by three players in the same rhythmic pattern. For example, one *gendeng* rhythm played in the early part of the ceremony is as follows: In the first session, *gendeng* are played in slow time to accompany the song sung by the *basi*. In this session, the rhythmic pattern is different to that played at the end of the session when the *basi* is in a trance. The pattern is as follows:

### *Getang*

In actual fact, the Orang Siang do not categorize the ring worn by the *basi* as a musical instrument, but an accessory. A leader of the Hindu religion of Kaharingan (subdistrict of Tanah Siang), named Simur (43 years old), stated that the only musical instrument used in the *belian* ceremony is the *gendeng*. The *basi* wear the accessories *gelang belian* (bracelets), *canang cawit*, *tapih*, *babat*, *panding*, *lawung ikat kepala* and *daun sawung*. Indeed, while it can be said that Simur’s opinion is valid, because the four bracelets worn by the *basi* are not played like the *gendeng* or other instruments, the bracelet can also be considered to function as an idiophone of the rattle type. Its type and function is similar to that of rattles used by some African ethnic groups (although not named by these groups, the rattles are played by being worn on the back or belted to the waist of the dancers); and to the *kami no suzu* found in Japan and a type of bell from Tibet.

### *Getang*

In the *belian* ceremony, the sounding of this rattle instrument seems to be very dominant, especially when a *basi* begins to dance to welcome the spirit called and when he enters into a trance. For example: During the session, the *basi* dances and sings in variation. In dancing, the rattle is also being played, as though providing ornamentation and filling in the *gendeng* rhythm. When a *basi* sings, the rattle is not heard, but sometimes the *gendeng* responds in short motives such as follows:

## CONCLUSION

Based on the study conducted, I can conclude that the orang Siang have two different views of the *belian* ceremony. A minority wants to retain the ceremony, while the majority of their society wishes to abandon it.

In fact, members of orang Siang do not classify themselves as belonging to majority or minority groups, but believe they are living the same tradition. On the contrary, I found individual members have different views regarding the *belian* ceremony tradition. Usually, supporters and participants constitute those who still believe in and follow the procedure in the ceremonies. In this case, it can be concluded that the progression of modernization and entry of a major religion that prohibits cure by *belian* ceremony have a strong influence on the continuing existence of *belian* ceremony and other ritual music.

It is necessary to conclude that the younger generation is not interested in some of the types of vocal music as *kandan*, *sasana*, *barung* and others. This phenomenon is not only taking place in orang Siang, but also in other rural areas of Kalimantan. One cause of this lack of interest among the younger generation regarding several types of song is the absence of written text for the song verse. Those who are educated seem to sing these songs with reluctance.

Orang Siang currently faces two important issues crucial to solving this crisis, especially regarding the parties responsible for cultural preservation. Because the problems are closely related to social identity, immediate action is required to maintain the unity of various national cultures.

Certainly, the research I undertook is only a marginal effort towards addressing the problems now facing orang Siang. However, the action proposed can provide a direction and motivation for the younger generation and for other researchers. This study could not have been carried out and its target achieved without the support of many organizations and individuals such as local government personnel, intellectuals, former researchers – and of course the younger generation of Siang society that have to retain the customs of this tradition.

I hope this brief article can be of use for readers and other researchers who may be interested in the preservation of the music of the Dayak peoples in general, particularly that of the Siang. This initial research is only the first step in determining more about the ethnomusicology of this group; an investigation of greater depth is necessary, however this will require a greater investment of human and capital resources and other support.

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