

# Invocatory Chant of the Sarawak Iban: *Timang Jalung - Gawai Antu*

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## Abstract

*Timang Jalung* is one of invocatory chants performed during the Sarawak's Iban *Gawai Antu* (Festival of the Dead). *Gawai Antu* is a major festival held cooperatively by a few families from a longhouse to secure auspicious after-life for their dead family members. *Timang Jalung* is performed exclusively by five-man-bards known as *Lemambang*. The scope of this research covers *Timang Jalung* performed within Sarawak's Saribas area. Sources for this research include perception of co-author as a performing *Lemambang*, analysis on co-author's performances, archive performances of other *Lemambang* and documentations on *Timang Jalung*. The *Timang Jalung* is monophonic with the single melodic line performed without accompaniment. The performance alternates between the leader and second *Lemambang* as soloists, and a chorus of 3 to 5 members. The first line of the chant begins with a sustained vocable that undergoes some melismatic treatment and ends with another vocable explosively. This is the preparation time for the *Lemambang* before he begins the performance. The stanza ends similarly as it starts. The chanting is generally unmetered. The strong pulses of 2 and 4 are felt due to vocalic rhyming from the same sound scheme of final syllable of words. Each stanza is made up of mixed-syllabic phrases with varying length. The use of 2- and 4-syllable words give the "weak-strong" stress which could be related to the walking movement of the *Lemambang* around the various parts of the longhouse. A holistic understanding of *Timang Jalung* is facilitated through the understanding of the Iban cultural context of life and death view.

## Keywords

Timang Jalung, Gawai Antu, Invocatory, Chant, Rhyming

## Introduction

This paper is a small-scale research into *Timang Jalung*, a traditional, ritual poetry form of the largest ethnic community of Sarawak, the Iban. *Timang Jalung* is the invocatory chant performed during the *Gawai Antu* (Festival of the Dead). The *Gawai Antu*, being one of the most expensive and elaborate festivals, is held by Iban communities in Saribas area in Sarawak, that includes areas such as Upper Skrang, Layar, Paku, Rimbas, Krian, Sebelak and Upper Julau to give honour to the spirits of their deceased family members. Hosting of *Gawai Antu* is usually done cooperatively by a few families of a longhouse to secure prosperity for dead family members in *Sebayan*, the Land of the Dead.

Sarawak, stretches some 800 kilometres along the northwest coast of Borneo, is one of the two eastern states of Malaysia. Sarawak, being a multi-ethnic society, is the home to over 30 ethnic groups (Jehom, 2008) with unique language, culture and lifestyle. Many of these languages are quite different phonologically thus making them mutually unintelligible at times. The Iban, being the largest ethnic group, has an estimated population of over 700,000 which comprises almost 30% of Sarawak's population. The Ibans have been reputed formerly as the most fearsome headhunters on the Borneo Island. However, the present day Ibans are a generous, hospitable and good-natured people.

*Timang Jalung*, a cultural and historical oral tradition of the Iban community, has been passed down by word of mouth from one generation to another as remembered by the *Lemambang* (bards). This ritual poem is sung to invite the spirits of the dead from the Land of the Dead,

*Sebayan*, to the world of the living. Being a community that practises animism belief, Buma (1987) described that "... the Iban traditional belief derived its origin from folklores and mythology". During *Gawai Antu*, "... the spirits of the dead are invited to the festivals and ritually entertained" (Ngadi, 1998). The spirits of the dead are believed to have travelled through a series of places in *Sebayan* before arriving at the home of the living. These spirits are said to stay with the living throughout the *Gawai Antu* ceremony. Since the ceremony involves the invitation of the dead souls, hence before the commencement of the ritual, the *Lemambang* performs the iron-biting ritual to strengthen his own spirit and also holds a jar to protect his spirit. The objects needed for these two ceremonies, a large, heavy knife, *parang* and a clay jar, are prepared and presented by the hosts to the *Lemambang*. At the end of the ceremony, the *Lemambang* holds the jar again for the symbolic return of his spirit.

This invocatory poem has been named *Timang Jalung* as the *Lemambang* carries a bowl known as *jalung* while performing the poem. The *jalung* is filled with fermented water (alcohol) which is covered with a piece of cloth. The content of the *jalung* will be drunk by *pengirup ai jalung* (*jalung* water drinker) and according to Ngadi (1998) "The communion of the dead and the living reaches its climax with the drinking of the *jalung* ...". As the fermented water in the *jalung* is meant to serve the dead souls, therefore the drinker should be brave enough to drink on behalf of these dead souls. Hence, the criteria for selection of drinker is among "...some old men renowned for bravery or riches, or other aged guests who is believed to possess a nature tough enough to encounter the risk of so near a contact with the shades of death." (Ngadi, 1998). The *Gawai Antu* ceremony usually begins at nine in the evening and ends at four the following morning.

## Hypothesis

The scope of this research covers *Timang Jalung* performed within the Saribas area of Sarawak.

*Timang Jalung*, along with other cultural elements, is diminishing in the modern Iban society. The main reason being many Iban have embraced other religions, especially Christianity. "The beliefs support the behaviours, the behaviours fit comfortably into the environment, and this in turn helps to reinforce the beliefs." (Sanggin, 2000). Therefore, abandoning traditional beliefs which are considered to be contradicting to their new religious teachings, particularly the belief on life after death and *Sebayan*, and consequently the hosting of *Gawai Antu* along with the performance *Timang Jalung* are fading in the Iban community life.

The existence of *Timang Jalung* is also threatened by the shrinking number of performing *Lemambang*. Most of the performing *Lemambang* are made up of the older generation. The younger generation shows little or no interest in substituting the older generation in the continuum of *Timang Jalung* performance. This could be due to the fact that performance of this tradition poem is incapable of generating lucrative economic income. Moreover, the younger generation generally sees no point in the sustainability of such oral tradition. However, *Timang Jalung* contains important information about the past of the Iban community and serves as a rich resource and reference for the development of modern Iban literature. Therefore, this study is important as an effort to preserve and conserve this oral tradition of the Iban community.

Through this study, it is hoped that a better understanding as to how engagement, both for the performer and the audience, is achieved through the employment of musical elements in the performance of the *Timang Jalung*.

## Literature Review

Sutlive, V., Sutlive, J., & Matusky, P. (2012) said that the three themes that dominate the Iban culture, greatly influence the community's behaviour and most apparent in their chants are

namely relationships, respect and reciprocity. They continued to say that the three themes are actually one as

“.. it is unthinkable that one can sustain meaningful ties without mutual respect and reciprocity... A sense of belonging is one of the deepest needs of every human being, and this is particularly apparent among the Ibans. Acceptance by others, mutuality of respect, and being remembered as a person of consequence is paramount” (p.23).

These three authors concluded that “ ...from birth until death, each Iban is part of nurturant, sustaining and expansive networks of kin, friends, and of worlds both seen and unseen. As in life, so in death: No Iban dies alone” (p.24). Hence, it is understandable that the Iban community is committed to host this expensive and elaborate festival where the surviving family members go through a series of ritual acts with the performance of *Timang Jalung* to convey honour to their deceased family members and to ensure that their deceased family members are established in the Land of the Dead. As an act of reciprocity, one of the three themes in the Iban culture, the deceased family members are to bring “blessings” to their surviving family members for them to be healthy and prosperous in the living world.

## Methodology

The scope of this research covers *Timang Jalung* performed within Sarawak’s Saribas area. Resources of this research include perception of the co-author as a performing *Lemambang*, analysis on co-author’s performances, archive performances of other *Lemambang* and other researches on *Timang Jalung*.

The performance of co-author on “Ngabas Panjuk” has been analysed for musical elements employed in the engagement of the performer and audience during the performance of *Timang Jalung*. The choice of “Ngabas Panjuk” was based on recommendation by co-author as “Ngabas Panjuk” is relatively shorter in length and is representative in many aspects. The recorded performance of “Ngabas Panjuk” by co-author has been analysed with the use of spectrographs generated by Adobe Audition.

## Findings

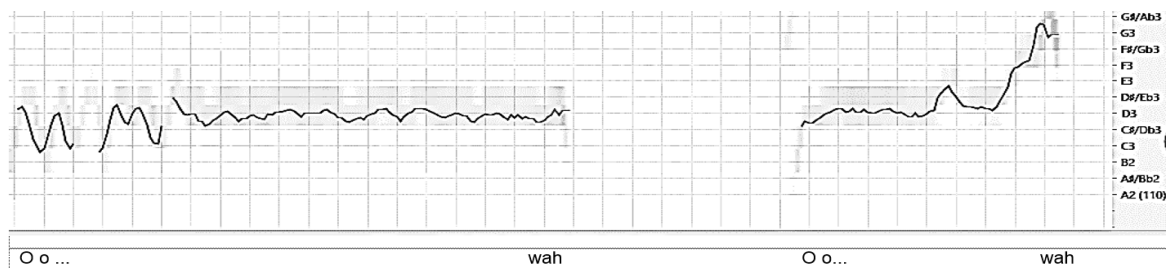
The *Timang Jalung* is monophonic and the single melodic line is performed without accompaniment. The performance starts off with the solo chanting by the leading *Lemambang* who is usually the team leader. His assistant *Lemambang* will take over the chanting of the second part. A chorus made up of three to five members will take over after the assistant *Lemambang* has done his solo part. This alternating pattern continues throughout the whole performance. The performance is solely done with the performers’ natural voices without the aid of any public address system, hence the volume of the performance is moderately loud. The chanting performance is done with a natural and stable voice without any special manipulation of the voice.

This paper focuses on the version of “Ngabas Panjuk” as performed by the co-author and the text of the *Timang Jalung* “Ngabas Panjuk” is as follows: -

Aram tua angu lebu repan  
Ngabas panjuk ke di teluk kampung dalam  
Lalu masukka kepiu baju merikan  
Lalu ditangkin perangin pedang tajam  
Lalu kebu bedaru pintu bandir tekam  
Lalu titi pentali rumah nyeruran  
Lalu begelih enggau ripih tiang medang lamba tebalian  
Datai di pala tangga  
meda engkeramba dua betunga

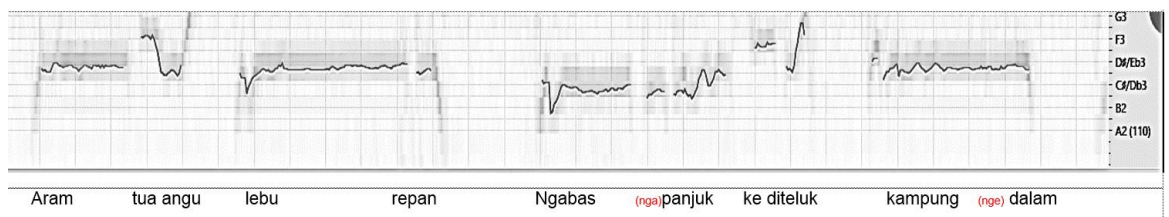
bakaka tau nanya  
 nelengaka rasa dabung geman  
 Lalu dijengkau lalau buluh payan  
 Lalu turun tangga tukun  
 numpu ke pun nangka lamun  
 ke bebuah bekatayun tuntun perepisan  
 Lalu datai di tengah laman luchak  
 tunyau teratak beris ujan  
 Lalu titi panti landi jalai nyeruran  
 Lalu datai di pendai ili  
 alai aki meruti jani babi dupan  
 Lalu ngilika ai nengah kerangan  
 Nyerimbing genting tanah renjan  
 Datai din lalu tentang enggau bulang mata mejam  
 Peda tali nyau terunti kiba kanan  
 Peda baur nyau lentur balat tetensam  
 Ansak semak-semak singkang bejalan  
 Peda tak nyintak indai burung sengayan  
 ke lapan belas kaban  
 nadai agi ngensungka pangan  
 ti teguran pampar lelang

The *Lemambang* starts the performance of “Ngabas Panjuk” with a prelude or “introductory” whereby he sustains on the vocable “oo”, or any other nonsense syllables, on a starting pitch and in this performance, the starting pitch is between C3 and D3. He then ends with another vocable “wah” explosively around the pitch as shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1: *Timang Jalung* : “Ngabas Panjuk” – Prelude**  
(Ngabong, 2018 0:04:00-0:12:00) duration: 8 seconds

After a short pause, he continues using the same vocable again and goes through some melismatic treatment (C#3 D3 E3 D3 F3 G3) before he ends explosively between G3 and G#3. This part of the performance occurs for a duration of about 8 seconds.



**Figure 2: *Timang Jalung* : “Ngabas Panjuk” – First Phrase**  
(Ngabong, 2018 0:12:00-0:26:00) duration: 14 seconds

The first phrase consists of a few shorter phrases with brief intervals between each one. The chanting becomes more even with words that end with the open vowel “u” like “angu” and “lebu”. The performer has manipulated the word “kampung” differently from the colloquial way of saying the word. The performer has intentionally sustained on the second of the word but does not complete the word, making it “kam-pu.....ng” where the ending diphthong sounds more like an inserted vocable. The performer is obviously trying to maintain the “u” sound scheme as in the first sub-phrase.

The second and third phrases have rather similar patterns as shown in figures 3 and 4.

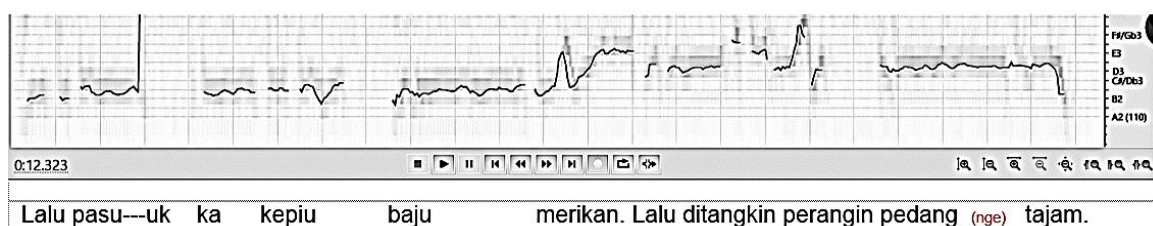


Figure 3: *Timang Jalung* : “Ngabas Panjuk” – Second Phrase  
(Ngabong, 2018 0:26:67-0:38:63) duration: 12 seconds

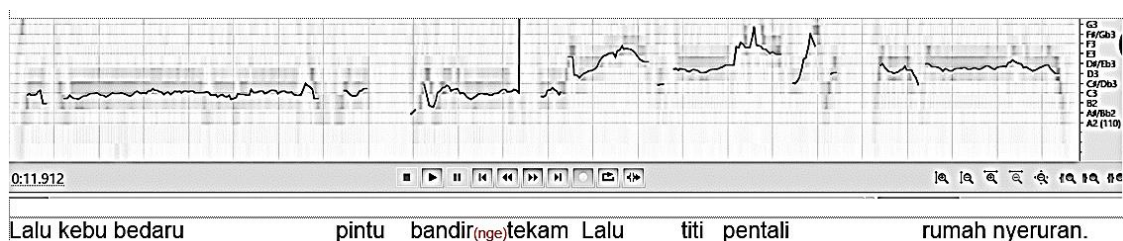


Figure 4: *Timang Jalung* : “Ngabas Panjuk” – Third Phrase  
(Ngabong, 2018 0:39:55-0:51:57) duration: 12 seconds

## Discussion

At the prelude or the “introductory” part of the performance, it is noted that the *Lemambang* sustains on some vocables and later does some melismatic treatment on these vocables through a range of pitches. During this time the *Lemambang* prepares himself mentally to begin the performance. During the preparation time, the *Lemambang* thinks about the text he is about to perform. When the *Lemambang* sustains on a pitch, he is informing the audience of the starting pitch of his performance. Later he does an ornamental phrase of several notes on the vocable, he literally sets the range of pitches that he will use during his performance. This is how the performer engages himself mentally as he arranges the text in his mind while setting the pitches of his performance. By indicating to the audience the starting pitch and the range of pitches he is using, the performer is engaging his audience into his performance.

The stanzas of *Timang Jalung* are made up of mixed-syllabic phrases and the length of each stanza may differ. The chanting performance is generally unmetered. However, strong pulses of 2 and 4 can be felt throughout the performance. This could be due to the vocalic rhyming from the final syllable of words ending on the same sound scheme. This could happen at word or phrase level. An example of rhyming at the phrase level can be seen in phrases 1-3 below where the underlined ending words of each sub-phrase and phrase end with “an” or “am”.

Aram tua angu lebu rep <u>an</u>	Ngabas panjuk ke di teluk kampung dalam
Lalu pasukan kepiu baju merika <u>n</u>	Lalu ditangkin perangin pedang taja <u>m</u>
Lalu kebu bedaru pintu bandir tek <u>am</u>	Lalu titi pentali rumah nyerura <u>n</u>

While rhyming at the word level can be seen in the ending sound scheme “u” of the words in the sub-phrases of 1, 2 and 3, it is noticed that the performer has consciously stays longer on the open vowel “u” on words like “lebu”, “baju”, “kebu” and “bedaru”. It is interesting to note how the performer has consciously added the vocable “nge” in order to achieve the sound scheme for “kampu.....ng” in the first phrase. Another apparent example is found in phrase two with the word ‘pasuk’ where he stays longer on the second half of the word and making it sounds like “pasu.....kka”.

The use of 2- and 4-syllable words, besides giving the feel of 2- and 4- strong pulses, it also gives the “weak-strong” stress to the performance. This could be related to the walking movement of the *Lemambang* around the various parts of the longhouse throughout the whole performance.

The whole performance is very rhythmic in nature as the *Lemambang* chooses words of similar sound scheme for the different parts of the *Timang Jalung* without sacrificing the content intended for the ritual. The vocalic rhyming, both at word and phrase levels, makes the performance “catchy” and the audience is easily engaged with the performance.

The ending of a stanza, similar to the coda, is equally interesting as it starts. The performer sustains on a vocable, for example “ooo...” and ends explosively with “wah”. The coda is noticed to sound more lyrical than the prelude.

## Conclusion

*Timang Jalung* is a traditional culture inherited from one generation to another and it has been kept and observed by some parts of the Iban community in Sarawak. To tap into *Timang Jalung* as resources for the building of modern day literature materials, the younger generation needs to be engaged with this performing art. To engage the audience, one has to be sensitive to the vocalic rhyming that has been achieved through the employment of similar ending sound scheme at the word and phrase levels. However, a holistic understanding of *Timang Jalung* is only possible with the understanding of the cultural context of the Iban people especially their view on life and death. Along with other cultural elements, *Timang Jalung* is becoming a diminishing art due to various factors as mentioned earlier on. Much attention is needed to preserve and conserve this valuable intangible heritage of the Iban community of Sarawak, Malaysia.

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