

The Use of Mantra Language in Traditional Healing Rituals of the Javanese Belumai II Community, Rejang Lebong Regency, Bengkulu Province

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the linguistic forms, symbolic meanings, and cultural functions of healing mantras among the Javanese Belumai II community in Padang Ulak Tanding, Rejang Lebong Regency, Bengkulu Province, Indonesia. Using a qualitative descriptive design, data were collected through observation of rituals, interviews with three practitioners, and documentation of recited mantras, followed by hermeneutic analysis. The results identify seven mantras employed for healing, including those addressing spirit disturbances, child protection, eye disease, toothache, abscess, headache, and sorcery-related illness. Structurally, the mantras appear in two forms: poetic free-verse and pantun with ABAB rhyme schemes, both framed by Islamic invocations such as *Bismillahirrahmanirrahim* and *Lailahaillallah*. Symbolically, they embody prayers for divine intervention, protective commands, metaphoric persuasion, and performative declarations that reinforce cultural belief in healing. These findings demonstrate that mantras function as both therapeutic expressions and cultural acts, sustaining intangible heritage and communal identity. Compared with earlier studies that focused mainly on ritual or symbolism, this research offers novelty by systematically integrating form and meaning in one community context. The study implies the importance of safeguarding oral traditions, supporting culturally sensitive health policies, and enriching educational curricula, while acknowledging limitations in scope and suggesting broader, interdisciplinary research.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received February 22, 2023

Revised June 16, 2023

Accepted August 24, 2023

KEYWORDS

Cultural identify; healing mantras; intangible heritage; oral tradition; ritual language.

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

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Introduction

Language is both a cultural product and a medium of social practice that organizes cooperation, meaning-making, and identity across generations. Within linguistic anthropology, language is understood not only as a system of symbols but also as a cultural resource and speaking as cultural practice (Duranti, 1997, 2003). This perspective situates language as central to human survival and cultural transmission, functioning as a bridge between personal experience and collective identity. In the Indonesian context, oral traditions have historically served as vital conduits for the preservation and transmission of local knowledge, values, and cosmologies. Among these traditions, ritual speech genres—particularly mantras—function not merely as

verbal formulae but as performative acts embedded in community belief systems and cultural practices (Brakel-Papenhuyzen, 2010; Melati & Rahardi, 2022; Triana Sinaga et al., 2018).

Within the Malay–Indonesian poetic ecology, *pantun* is widely recognized as one of the most enduring oral verse forms. Characterized by quatrains with ABAB rhyme patterns, *pantun* integrates aesthetic qualities with moral and social functions. Its inscription on UNESCO's Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2020 highlights the recognition of oral poetry not only as cultural heritage but also as a living practice that continues to shape identity and intergenerational communication (UNESCO, 2019, 2021a). The use of *pantun* and related poetic devices in ritual settings demonstrates how form and function converge in oral traditions, enhancing memorability, authority, and the perceived efficacy of ritual speech.

In Javanese society, ritual practices are deeply syncretic, intertwining Islamic invocations with pre-Islamic animistic and Hindu-Buddhist residues. Healing rituals are central to this syncretic religious landscape, reflecting both spiritual and cultural dimensions of community life (Beatty, 2003; Woodward, 1985). Scholars of Javanese Islam have emphasized that local religiosity is neither static nor homogenous, but rather negotiated through everyday practices such as healing, where divine invocations coexist with local spirit beliefs. This pluralistic orientation underscores the adaptability of Javanese cultural systems in sustaining health practices that are simultaneously theological, symbolic, and communal.

From an ethnomedicinal perspective, healing knowledge in Indonesia is often mediated by local specialists such as *dukun*, *tabib*, or *balian*, who combine prayer, incantation, and natural remedies in therapeutic repertoires. Recent studies show that ritual language continues to coexist with biomedical practices, particularly in rural or semi-urban contexts where healthcare access may be limited or where cultural traditions remain strong (Ahsan et al., 2023; Caesarine & Setyaningsih, 2023; Mustofa et al., 2021). Healing mantras, in particular, exemplify the intersection of linguistic form and therapeutic meaning. Their formulaic utterances, rhythmic parallelism, and invocation of divine names are believed to have performative efficacy, mediating relationships between the human, spiritual, and divine realms (Miharja et al., 2022; Robbins, 2001; Turin, 2014).

The performative nature of ritual language has been theorized as a convergence of poetics, social authority, and situational framing. Efficacy is understood as emerging not merely from the semantic content of the words but from their conventional form, their ritualized repetition, and their indexical links to authoritative sources such as sacred texts or ancestral traditions (Tambiah, 1985; Duranti, 2015; Foley, 2019). In Javanese healing contexts, mantras often begin with Islamic invocations such as *Bismillāh* and conclude with *Lā ilāha illā Allāh*, situating the ritual act within an Islamic theological framework while simultaneously preserving older cosmological elements. This dual orientation illustrates how Javanese communities negotiate religious orthodoxy with local tradition in ways that are both pragmatic and culturally resilient (Beatty, 2019; Woodward, 2011; Windarani et al., 2021).

Despite modernization and the spread of biomedical healthcare, many Indonesian communities continue to sustain ritual healing as a parallel system of care. Such practices are not only therapeutic but also symbolic acts of cultural preservation and collective identity. In Bengkulu Province, particularly among the Javanese Belumai II community of Padang Ulak Tanding, healing rituals employing mantras remain actively practiced. These mantras are

typically structured either in free verse or in *pantun* form, functioning simultaneously as prayers, requests, and symbolic negotiations with spiritual forces. Yet, although ethnographic and cultural studies have documented ritual practices broadly ([Hadzantonis, 2023](#); [Kavanagh et al., 2017](#); [Nasution et al., 2023](#)), there remains limited systematic analysis of the linguistic forms and hermeneutic meanings of mantras in this specific regional and cultural setting.

This research identifies a significant gap in the literature. Existing studies have often described rituals in symbolic terms, catalogued ethnomedicinal materials, or discussed Javanese syncretism in general, but few have provided an integrated sociolinguistic analysis that systematically relates the forms of mantra (poetry, rhyme, parallelism) to their meanings (prayer, protection, surrender to God, spirit negotiation) within the healing practices of Bengkulu's Javanese Belumai II community. To address this gap, the present study pursues two main objectives: first, to describe the structural patterns of the mantra language used in traditional healing rituals; and second, to interpret their symbolic and spiritual meanings through a hermeneutic and context-sensitive framework. By bridging sociolinguistic, anthropological, and ethnomedicinal perspectives, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the role of oral traditions in sustaining cultural identity and alternative health practices in contemporary Indonesia.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design, which is particularly appropriate for examining cultural texts and practices within their natural context. A qualitative approach allows the researcher to capture the depth of meaning, symbolism, and social functions embedded in ritual language, emphasizing interpretation rather than measurement ([Creswell & Creswell, 2018](#); [Doyle et al., 2020](#); [Lim, 2023](#)). The research was conducted in Belumai II Village, Padang Ulak Tanding District, Rejang Lebong Regency, Bengkulu Province, a community where traditional healing practices remain an integral part of cultural and spiritual life. The fieldwork spanned approximately two months: the first month was devoted to data collection and the second to transcription, coding, and interpretive analysis.

Data were primarily obtained through three complementary strategies. First, participant observation was conducted during healing rituals to capture the performance of mantras, contextual settings, and nonverbal elements such as gestures, objects, and ritual sequences. Second, semi-structured interviews were carried out with three key informants—one central ritual practitioner (*dukun*) and two supporting informants—to obtain insider perspectives regarding the form, function, and meaning of mantras. Third, documentation techniques, including audio recording, field notes, and transcription of mantra texts, were employed to preserve the authenticity of the oral data. These triangulated sources ensured that data collection encompassed both emic (insider) and etic (researcher's analytical) perspectives.

The process of data analysis followed an inductive hermeneutic approach. Transcribed mantra texts were first classified based on their structural forms (poetic free verse or *pantun* with ABAB rhyme schemes). Each text was then coded according to thematic functions, such as healing, protection, prayer, or negotiation with spiritual entities. The hermeneutic interpretation proceeded in three stages: (1) structural identification of poetic and linguistic features, (2) functional categorization of ritual contexts, and (3) interpretive analysis of symbolic meanings

within Javanese cultural and religious frameworks. To enhance credibility, researcher triangulation was applied, and interpretations were validated through member-checking with informants. Dependability was ensured by maintaining detailed field notes and audit trails of analytical decisions.

Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing informant identities. The research also adhered to cultural sensitivity principles, ensuring respect for sacred rituals and the community’s authority over their own cultural knowledge. By combining methodological rigor with ethical responsibility, the study ensures that findings are both academically robust and culturally respectful.

Results and Discussion

Result

Data obtained from the Javanese Belumai II community in Padang Ulak Tanding District, Rejang Lebong Regency, revealed the existence of seven healing mantras that are still actively used in traditional rituals. These mantras were collected through interviews with informants and direct observation during ritual practices. The seven identified mantras include: a mantra to repel general spirit disturbances, a mantra specifically to protect children (*balita*) from supernatural interference, a mantra for treating eye disease, a mantra for relieving toothache, a mantra for curing abscesses (*bisul*), a mantra for reducing headaches, and a mantra to counter illnesses believed to be caused by witchcraft or sorcery.

The mantras are orally transmitted and are recited by ritual practitioners during healing ceremonies, often accompanied by symbolic actions such as blowing on water or touching the patient. Structurally, the mantras can be categorized into two main forms: poetic free-verse mantras that employ flexible rhythm and imagery, and pantun-based mantras that adhere to fixed rhyme schemes and symmetrical structures. Across all variations, the use of Islamic invocations such as *Bismillahirrahmanirrahim* and *Lailahaillallah* appears consistently at the beginning and end of the recitations, highlighting a strong integration of religious elements into local oral traditions. The findings confirm that these mantras function not only as linguistic expressions but also as performative acts that embody belief, prayer, and cultural resilience in the face of illness and adversity.

Discussion

The seven mantras documented in this study illustrate the dynamic relationship between linguistic form, symbolic meaning, and ritual function in the healing traditions of the Javanese Belumai II community. These mantras reveal not only the persistence of oral heritage but also the creative integration of Islamic expressions and indigenous cosmologies.

Table 1. Healing Mantras of the Javanese Belumai II Community

No	Mantra (Original Text)	Translation (English)	Context
1	Bismillahirrohmanirrohim / Pitik ireng nesu-nesu / Setenga ing mangan kewan	In the name of Allah / Black chicken is angry / Half eaten by animals / Go away, do not	Expelling spirits

No	Mantra (Original Text)	Translation (English)	Context
	/ Lungaa kowe aja neng kene / Berkat laillahailallah	stay here / By the blessing of "There is no God but Allah"	disturbing adults
2	Kowe setan kue longgak / Singkirkan awakmu / Arep banjur yukkung / Baja besi / Penguat lemah	You demon, step aside / Remove yourself / Go away / Iron steel / Strengtheners of the earth	Protecting children from spirit attacks
3	Bismillahirrohmanirrohim / Wuluan talapak tanganku / Mungkin saket moto / Ora ono wulu tanganku / Ra bakal saket moto	In the name of Allah / Hair grows on my palm / Maybe I have eye pain / No hair grows on my palm / Then I will not have eye pain	Healing eye pain
4	Bismillahirrohmanirrahim / Ngadek neng kene serumun pring / Sala untu oraa apa-apa / Metu bisa saka awak / Berkat Lailahailallah / Muhammadarrasulullah	In the name of Allah / Stand here like bamboo / The tooth is not at fault / Pain leave the body / With the blessing of "There is no God but Allah" / Muhammad is His Messenger	Healing toothache
5	Bismillahirrohmanirrohim / Kanda-kanda tepi ning banyu / Aku uncal karo lemah baku / Dene balung ole cair / Apa mane daging kang siji potong / Lailahailallah	In the name of Allah / Standing at the riverbank / I throw with soil / Even bone can dissolve / How much more just a piece of flesh / There is no God but Allah	Healing abscess
6	Bismillahirrohmanirrohim / Hai anak sidang manusia / Hai anak loro sirah / Lewat langsung sakatika / Langsuong terangkat loro sirah	In the name of Allah / O human child / O child with headache / Go away immediately / The headache is instantly lifted	Healing headache
7	Mumet kaliling balik mudiak / Menek dinding mergo sihir / Lungo seng adoh seng milu wong bar mudik / Ontakkan kaki tolak sihir	Dizzy turning back upstream / Climb the wall because of sorcery / Go away far with those returning / Stomp your feet to repel sorcery	Healing illness caused by witchcraft

(Source: Field data, 2023)

To visualize the analytical connection between form, meaning, function, and cultural role, the following figure illustrates how structural features of the mantras influence symbolic interpretations, which in turn shape their ritual functions and broader contributions to cultural identity and health pluralism.

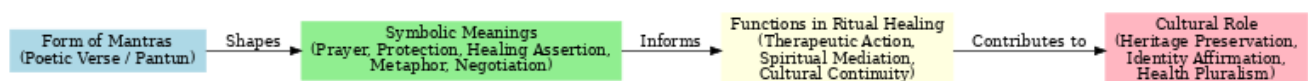


Figure 1. Analytical Relationship between Form, Meaning, Function, and Cultural Role of Healing Mantras

(Source: Author's analysis, 2023)

The forms and contents of these mantras demonstrate that oral healing traditions in Belun II integrate two main structural types: flexible poetic verses and pantun with fixed rhyme patterns. The use of pantun form resonates with UNESCO's recognition of pantun as an intangible cultural heritage of humanity, reflecting how aesthetic structures in oral poetry enhance both

memorability and ritual authority (UNESCO, 2021). This is consistent with Foley, (2019) emphasis on oral poetics as central to ritual efficacy and description of pantun as a didactic and symbolic medium.

Meaning of the Healing Mantras

Mantra for Spirit Disturbance (General)

This mantra begins with *Bismillahirrahmanirrahim* and ends with *Lailahaillallah*, showing surrender to God. Its meaning lies in asking for divine help to drive away disturbing spirits. The imagery of the black chicken represents chaos, while the invocations anchor the healing act within Islamic faith.

Mantra for Spirit Disturbance in Children (*Balita*)

This mantra reflects the community's belief that children under five are vulnerable to spirit interference. The line *Singkirkan awakmu* directly commands the spirit to leave. The opening invocation emphasizes that all requests are directed to Allah, while the practice of blowing the mantra over the child three times symbolizes purification and divine protection.

Mantra for Eye Disease

The mantra uses paradoxical imagery—such as “hair growing on the palm”—to illustrate impossibility, symbolically implying that the eye pain should also be impossible to persist. This form of persuasion strengthens the patient's confidence in healing. The repeated invocations emphasize that recovery is ultimately dependent on God's will.

Mantra for Toothache

This mantra contains the phrase *Sala untu ora apa-apa* (The tooth is not at fault), symbolically absolving the tooth of blame. By shifting the cause of illness away from the body, the mantra rhetorically justifies recovery. The opening and closing invocations emphasize that healing depends on divine mercy.

Mantra for Abscess (*Bisul*)

The comparison “Even bone can dissolve, how much more just a piece of flesh” provides a metaphorical logic of persuasion. The meaning here is that an abscess, being softer than bone, should be easy to cure. The mantra conveys confidence and invokes God's permission for the healing process.

Mantra for Headache

The lines *Hai anak loro sirah* (O child with headache) and *Langsuong terangkat loro sirah* (The headache is instantly lifted) are direct performative utterances that assert immediate recovery. The structure of the mantra reassures the patient, while the divine invocation legitimizes the healing as divinely sanctioned.

Mantra against Witchcraft-induced Illness

This mantra is explicitly directed at repelling sorcery. The lines *Lungo seng adoh seng milu wong bar mudik* and *Ontakkan kaki tolak sihir* symbolically describe the banishment of harmful forces. The stomping of the foot serves both as ritual action and as a performative declaration of power over witchcraft.

From a symbolic perspective, the mantras reveal multiple layers of meaning. They function as prayers for divine intervention, as protective formulas to repel harmful spirits, as declarative

assertions that illness can and must be removed, and as metaphoric or persuasive comparisons that reaffirm the possibility of healing. This aligns with Tavárez, (2014) argument that ritual language derives its power from indexical links to divine authority and from its conventionalized poetic form. Similar findings were reported in studies of Banten communities, where ritual language reinforces collective identity and cosmological beliefs (Humaeni, 2018), in Dayak Lawangan chants that emphasize negotiation with unseen beings, in Balinese ethnomedicinal prayers where invocations are intertwined with plant remedies (Andila et al., 2023), and in Osing healing traditions of Banyuwangi that coexist with biomedical practices (Caesarine, 2023).

Compared to these studies, the novelty of the present research lies in its integrated analysis of both the form and meaning of mantras within a single community context. Previous works often focused either on symbolic functions or on ritual practices without providing a systematic account of how poetic structures—whether free verse or pantun—are essential to the perceived efficacy of healing. By linking linguistic structure to symbolic meaning, this study demonstrates that ritual healing is not only a matter of belief but also of linguistic performance and cultural aesthetics.

The implications of these findings are manifold. First, documenting healing mantras contributes to safeguarding intangible cultural heritage in the face of globalization and modernization. Second, understanding the coexistence of healing mantras with biomedical practices highlights the pluralistic nature of health systems in Indonesia and underscores the need for culturally sensitive health policies. Third, incorporating mantras into educational curricula as examples of oral literature and cultural resilience can strengthen cultural awareness and pride among younger generations.

Nevertheless, the study has limitations. The reliance on three informants, although sufficient for exploratory depth, may not capture the full diversity of healing practices within the community. The qualitative approach prioritizes depth over generalizability, leaving open opportunities for broader comparative studies across different Javanese subcultures or Indonesian ethnic groups. Furthermore, while the hermeneutic method offers rich interpretation, it remains dependent on researcher subjectivity, which future studies could complement with interdisciplinary collaboration involving linguists, anthropologists, and medical practitioners.

In summary, the novelty of this research lies in its integrated analysis of both the structural forms and symbolic meanings of healing mantras within a single Javanese community, highlighting that linguistic aesthetics—whether in free-verse or pantun structures—are central to the perceived efficacy of healing. The implications extend to the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage, the recognition of health pluralism where traditional and biomedical practices coexist, and the enrichment of education through the integration of oral literature and local wisdom into curricula. At the same time, the study's limitations must be acknowledged, particularly the small number of informants and the interpretive nature of the hermeneutic approach. These limitations open avenues for future research to adopt broader comparative samples and interdisciplinary collaboration in order to deepen the understanding of ritual language as both cultural heritage and therapeutic practice.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the healing mantras of the Javanese Belumai II community in Padang Ulak Tanding, Rejang Lebong Regency, embody a dynamic interplay between linguistic form,

symbolic meaning, and cultural function that sustains both therapeutic practices and intangible cultural heritage. The mantras are expressed in two main structures—poetic free verse and pantun with fixed rhyme patterns—each carrying layered meanings that combine Islamic invocations, protective commands, metaphoric persuasion, and performative declarations aimed at healing and protection. These findings highlight that ritual healing is not merely a matter of belief but a performative act rooted in linguistic aesthetics and cultural resilience, confirming that oral traditions continue to coexist with biomedical practices as part of Indonesia’s plural health systems. The novelty of this research lies in its integrated analysis of both form and meaning within a single community context, advancing a holistic perspective on the role of oral literature in health and identity. While limited by the small number of informants and the interpretive nature of hermeneutic analysis, the study offers important implications for safeguarding intangible heritage, promoting culturally sensitive health approaches, and enriching educational curricula with local wisdom. Future research is recommended to expand comparative perspectives across diverse regions and to foster interdisciplinary collaboration to deepen the understanding of ritual language as both cultural heritage and therapeutic practice.

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