

*"Staged" Rituals, "Veiled" Spells:*  
Multiple Language Ideologies  
and Changes in Petalangan Traditional Verbal Genres

- **Objective**

Application of Irvine&Gal's semiotic model(2000)  
to studies of changes of verbal genres.

“ which genres survive and are reinterpreted,  
which remain ‘folklore,’ and which ones are erased  
altogether is a matter crucially mediated by  
language ideologies” (Kuipers 1998:6).

The Petalangan people in Indonesia have transformed their oral tradition in response to their social marginalization. By using Irvine and Gal's semiotic model of linguistic differentiation, this paper examines how this model can be applied to explain changes of verbal genres. As Joel Kuipers points out in his study of Weyewa ritual speech, locally defined concepts of genre are important in studies of language ideology because “which genres survive and are reinterpreted, which remain as ‘folklore,’ and which ones are erased altogether is a matter crucially mediated by language ideologies” (1998: 6). Focusing on two Petalangan traditional genres—public healing rituals and personal magic spells, I will discuss 1) how these two genres have changed, and 2) what ideologies have mediated these changes. By adopting Irvine and Gal's concepts of ‘iconization,’ ‘erasure,’ and ‘fractal recursiveness,’ I will show the processes in which Petalangans' conceptualizations of marginality and language ideologies contributed to the changes of the Petalangan traditional verbal genres. The data presented in this paper draw on my fourteen-month ethnographic and linguistic field research that I completed among the Petalangan people between 1998 and 2000.

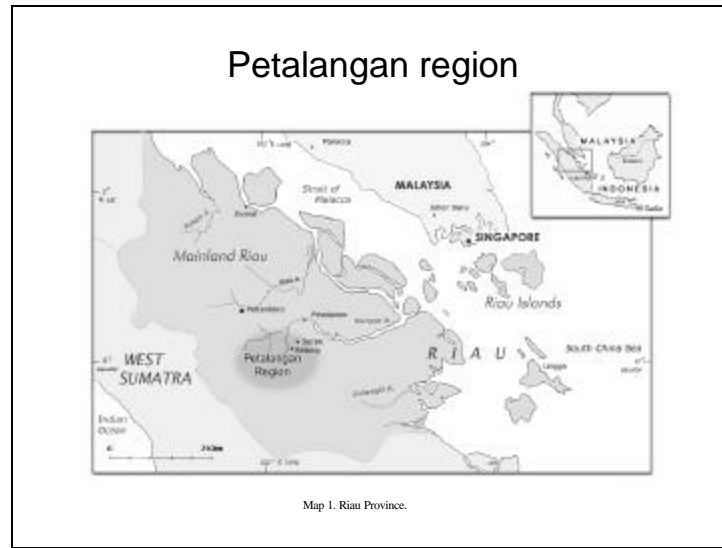
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### Discussion

1. Changes of the Petalangan public healing ritual (*belian*) and personal magic spells
2. Processes in which Petalangan conceptualizations of marginality and language ideologies have contributed to the changes

Focusing on two Petalangan traditional genres—public healing rituals and personal magic spells, I will discuss 1) how these two genres have changed, and 2) what ideologies have mediated these changes. By adopting Irvine and Gal's concepts of 'iconization,' 'erasure,' and 'fractal recursiveness,' I will show the processes in which Petalangans' conceptualizations of marginality and language ideologies contributed to the changes of the Petalangan traditional verbal genres. The data presented in this paper draw on my fourteen-month ethnographic and linguistic field research that I completed among the Petalangan people between 1998 and 2000.

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## II. Marginality as an Ideological Construct

Petalangan people are one of the indigenous ethnic groups on Sumatra in Indonesia.

## II. Marginality as an Ideological Construct

- Dual marginality of Petalangan society
  - excluded from economic benefits
  - not recognized as an “official” marginal group
- National ideology of marginality
  - official category of “Isolated Tribes” (*Suku Terasing*)
  - center : periphery = modernity : backwardness  
= superior : inferior

Geographically remote and socially isolated, Petalangan society has been less influenced by economic development than any other ethnic groups in the region. However, Petalangan people have not been officially recognized by the Indonesian state as an “Isolated Tribe” (*Suku Terasing*), the official category for under-developed ethnic minorities in Indonesia. Indeed, the Petalangan people, as an unofficial marginal group, stand to lose more because they do not have any voice to the public. Under the motto “Unity and Diversity,” Indonesian government has tried to maintain ethnic diversity, and at the same time, in the name of modernization, it has sought to integrate ethnic groups within the nation-state. In the process, however, cultural difference of marginal groups only indicates the inferior position of the periphery to the “modern” lifestyle of the center. This dominant ideology of marginality is enacted and reproduced through Petalangans’ interactions with neighboring Riau Malays. Riau Malays, who adhere to Islam, often interpret marginality as remoteness from the nationally recognized religions, such as Islam. Petalangans’ practices of rituals and magic have led the Riau Malays to view the Petalangans as a pagan people. Against this background, the Petalangan people attempt to frame themselves so as to be recognizable in their interactions with other ethnic groups and with Indonesian state power. The revitalization and performance of the Petalangan local oral traditions have been a central effort to claim Petalangan culture as distinctive as “original Malays” or the “region’s most ancient occupants” who preserve the prototype of Riau Malay culture.

## II. Marginality as an Ideological Construct (cont')

- Riau Malays' ideology of marginality
  - Riau Malays : Petalangers = Islam : pagan
- Petalangers' efforts for recognition
  - From "primitive" local peculiarities to cultural specialties
  - Claims to "original Malays" (*Melayu asli*) who preserve the prototype of Riau Malay culture.


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Against this background, the Petalangan people attempt to frame themselves so as to be recognizable in their interactions with other ethnic groups and with Indonesian state power. The Petalangan oral traditions that look peculiar and authentic to outsiders are one of the main resources that Petalangers can use to claim their distinctive local culture. At the same time, Petalangers have increased their efforts to make the stereotypically stigmatized "primitive" local peculiarities into cultural specialties as "original Malays" or the "region's most ancient occupants" who preserve the prototype of Riau Malay culture.

III. "Staged" Rituals,  
Performed Marginality

*Belian* Healing Ritual

Practice vs. Art



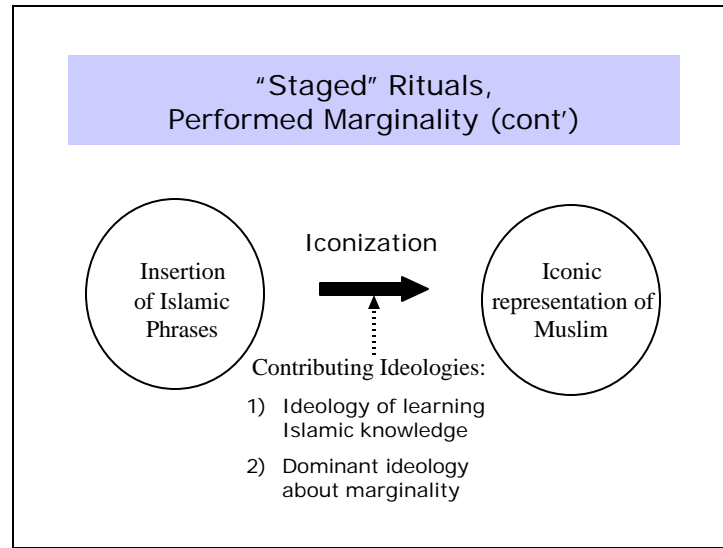
III. "Staged" Rituals, Performed Marginality

Although the Petalangan public healing ritual *belian* is still practiced for healing in Petalangan communities, this ritual has been "staged" to represent Petalangan traditional art. The *belian* ritual is often reformatted as an exotic dance, and its songs are recorded as a folksong.

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As one of the “staged” versions of the belian ritual, Example 1 is an excerpt from the CD “Music from the Forests of Riau and Mentawai,” produced by the Smithsonian Institution as a project on music of Indonesia. This CD contains a shortened version of the belian ritual songs, as a representation of the Petalangan traditional music. Uniquely organized as a series of questions and answers between the shaman and his assistant, the song dignifies each part of a flower shaped handicraft for offering.

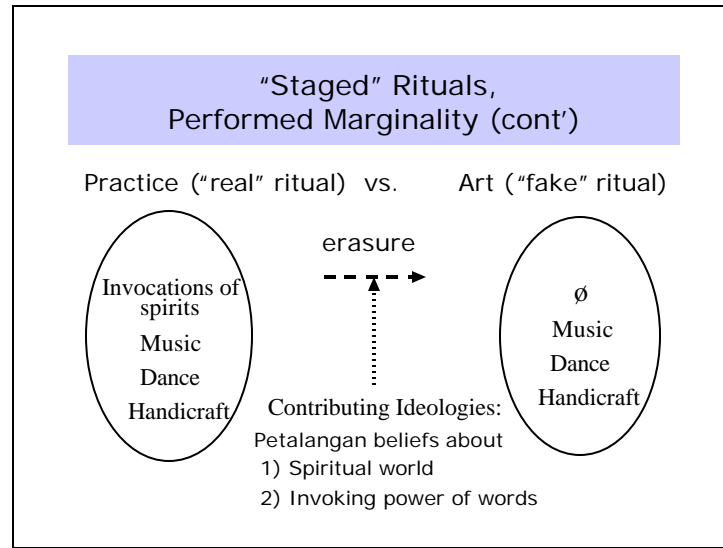


The most distinctive change found in this shortened version is the insertion of Islamic phrases. For example, the shaman and his assistant greet each other by exchanging “asalamalaikum” and “alaikumsalam.”(play tape). And the song ends by reciting Koranic verses such as “Lailahaillah” there is no god but Allah (play tape).

First, the ideology of learning contributed to this change through iconization. Given that Islamic knowledge is obtained only through education, by learning how to read Arabic and recite Koranic verses, Islamic phrases themselves embody his/her commitments as a Muslim. Uses of Islamic phrases become an iconic representation of Petalangan’s Muslim identity.

Second, the Indonesian dominant ideology about marginality and local culture plays a role in this change through “iconization.” Locality often implies not only the spatial remoteness but also temporal backwardness. Local forms of Islamic features that I marked with \* in Example 1 on your handout, convey the Petalangan archaic characteristics. Performed in an old type of Malay, for example, “Olah” for Allah, and other spirit names that combine Islamic features and the Petalangan folk beliefs, such as “White Bird the Prophet of Prayer” display the Petalangan culture as preserving ancestral values of Malay Muslim culture, which are no longer found in the urban area.

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However, the forms of the belian ritual performance have not been forced to change only by external factors. Petalangan’s own belief system and language ideology also contributed to the change.

Petalangan people often say that the belian ritual is “*longkap*” (complete), because it combines various performing arts, music, dance, songs, and handicrafts, showing all aspects of Petalangan culture. However, most reformatted versions of belian do not contain invocations. In the original version, each stanza of the belian songs always starts with an invocation of the shaman’s spirit familiars who are addressed as the shaman’s fiancées or girlfriends. In example 1, invocations are also missing, and marked points (A) (B) (C) in example 1 indicate the missing locations of invocations.

The Petalangan belief about the invoking power of words renders spiritual attributes of the “staged” belian ritual invisible, making only partial components of the ritual represent a whole, a process similar to Irvine and Gal’s concept of “erasure”(2000). Petalangan still believe in the spiritual world and are afraid to offend the spirits by revealing the spirits’ names outside healing contexts. Through the erasure of invocations, Petalangan make a clear distinction between a “real” ritual and a “fake” one, and justify their performances of a “fake” ritual as an art form.

#### IV. "Veiled" Spells, Resisting Marginality

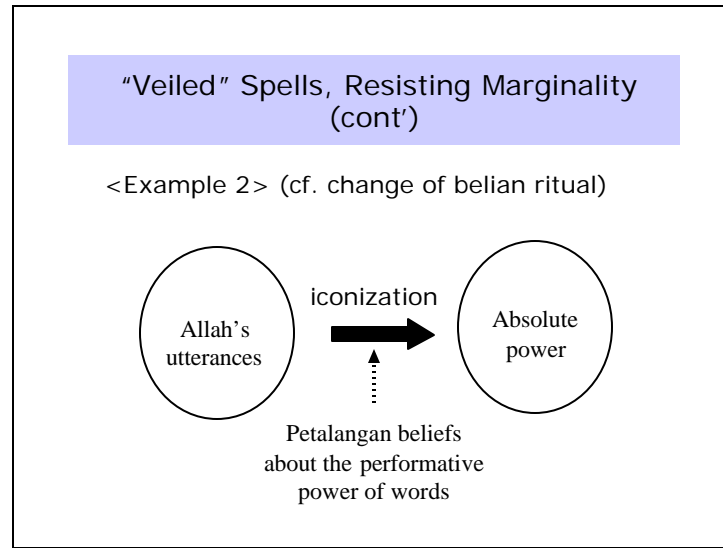


- Experience of marginality as emotion:  
"fear," "shame," "humility"
- Magic spells as  
"ancestors' words"

#### IV. "Veiled" Spells, Resisting Marginality.

Petalangans experience and express their marginal positions in emotional terms; they feel 'fear,' 'shame,' and 'humility' in their relations with powerful outsiders. To overcome their feelings of subordination and social inferiority, Petalangans use their magic spells in their social encounters with outsiders. On the other hand, Urban Malays regard Petalangan practice of magic as "primitive" and "backward," yet they are afraid of the marginal people's spiritual potency. Consequently, the practices of magic spells have provided the Petalangan people with a source of extraneous power.

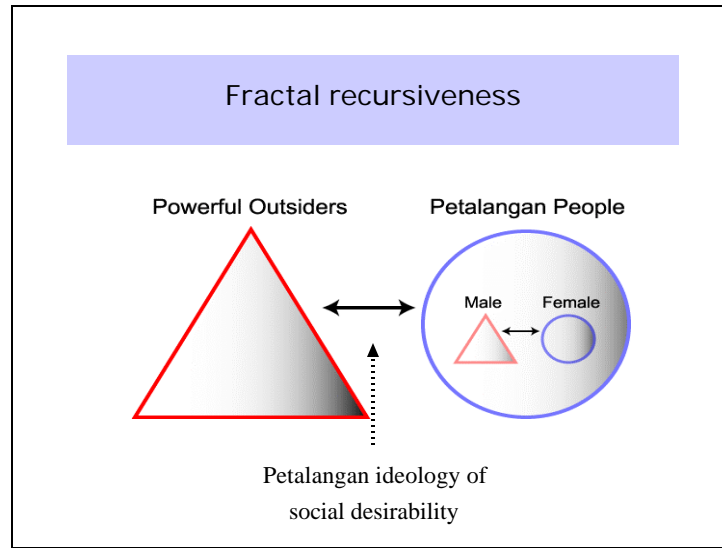
They say that the power of magic spells has nothing to do with the individual's potency. As "words of ancestors" (*kato o'ang tuo-tuo dulu*), magic spells exist as a source of power by themselves detached from people. Even repeating magic spells is believed to carry the same creative force in the present context as when uttered by the ancestors.



Changing forms and uses of Petalangan personal magic spells demonstrate how the Petalangan belief about the performative power of words mediates between linguistic and social change. First of all, similar to the changes found in the ‘staged’ form of belian, Islamic phrases are also inserted into the Petalangan magic spells. Example 2 is a Petalangan magic spell called “King Spleen’s Words.”

This spell is regarded as one of the most powerful spells to defeat an opponent, because it contains the name of Allah, and quotes God’s utterances directly. This spell also includes what Petalangan people think to be Arabic words, such as “*kum*” and “*sokalikum*,” similar to the Koranic verses of *kun fayakun*, meaning “Become! And it came into being”. This phrase evokes God’s power to create the world from a single command (cf. Bowen 1993).

Outsiders often regard the insertion of Islamic features in the spells as reflecting Petalangans’ “Islamization.” However, this change is not to index Petalangans’ Muslim identity, but rather to enhance the spiritual power of magic. This change also involves a process of “iconization,” similar to what we found in the belian ritual. But the process takes place in different levels; while Islamic phrases in the ritual represent their speakers, that is, Muslims, those in personal magic spells are iconized with their origin, that is, God, so that the Islamic phrases appear as inherently containing God’s power.



Petalangan magic spells have changed in their uses as well. For example, Petalangan male elder leaders appropriate women's beauty spells when they try to 'appeal' to powerful outsiders during land disputes. Just as women hope to capture other's attention by casting magic spells, the Petalangan male leaders employ women's magic to get over the feelings of frustration and fear of "not being heard" by powerful outsiders. Petalangan ideology of social desirability attributes the change through a process of "fractal recursiveness". Given that Petalangans conceive of power as emphasizing the person's sociality and desirability to attract others, male and female relations within Petalangan society are projected onto Petalangan interactions with outsiders. People transform and interpret their marginal position in terms of female dependency on male protection and care to solicit nurturance and protection from their superiors. It is within this framework that Petalangan people attempt to solicit attention and economic support from powerful outsiders including urban Malay elites, as well as from the state.

## V. Conclusion

- Attention to ideological links between linguistic and social change reveals:
  - multiple language ideologies that have operated differently across genres and social contexts
  - subjectivity and diversity of marginality

### V. Conclusion

In conclusion, Petalangan genres of ritual and magic spells have not simply disappeared; rather, they are still used in a form that has been revitalized and reformatted for different meanings in social marginalization process. Irvine and Gal's model on semiotic processes of language differentiation provides a useful framework to analyze multiple ideologies that have operated differently across the genres and social contexts.

The Petalangan case shows that Petalangans actively adopt and reinterpret multiple and even conflicting ideologies to cope with their marginalization, refuting simple dichotomy between subordination and resistance of a marginal group, and revealing subjectivity and diversity of marginality. Without any ready-made "labels," such as ethnicity or religion, that are recognizable to others, Petalangans have sought access to communication with others by inserting themselves into the dominant discourse of marginality. At the same time, in their face-to-face interactions with outsiders, Petalangans still maintain the practices of magic spells to cope with their feelings of subordination. Thus, Petalangan oral tradition appears not as a collection of fixed texts but as an ongoing social practice in which Petalangan language practices converge with the politics of marginality.

