

The Coming of the Gods. An Iban Invocatory Chant (Timang Gawai Amat) of the Baleh River Region, Sarawak. By James Jemut Masing, with a Foreword by Derek Freeman. Canberra: Department of Anthropology, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University, 1997. 2 volumes. Pp. xii, 132, and 447, maps, figures, tables, glossary.

This monumental work is based on James Masing's doctoral thesis which was presented to the Australian National University in 1981. In two volumes, it comprises a description and analysis of an invocatory chant, which accompanies an Iban ritual of the highest significance, and a record in Iban and English translation of the text. The introductory volume places the chant in its religious and broader cultural context; it provides an invaluable statement for our understanding of the beliefs and customary practices of the pagan Iban. The second volume, of nearly 450 pages, contains the translation.

In many respects this study is a truly co-operative venture. The substantial part of the *timang gawai amat* (Parts I to VIII of Volume 2) was recorded in the Kapit district of Sarawak between July 1949 and January 1950 by Derek Freeman and his Iban assistant, Patrick Ringkai, from an Iban bard (*lemambang*), Igoh anak Impin, whom Freeman rightly describes as "a poet of genius" (p. ix). Freeman assembled an annotated manuscript of 927 pages, and undertook further work on it during a subsequent visit to Sarawak in 1957–58. At the time Freeman conducted his research, the Iban of the Baleh region were "still actively practising their traditional religion" (p. ix). However, Freeman realized that the text needed much more detailed research and contemplation, ideally by a local Iban scholar. In the late 1970s, James Masing, himself a Baleh Iban, took up the task for his doctoral thesis; he worked on the text during field research in 1978–79 in the Mujong river basin, a main tributary of the Baleh river, where he carried out intensive investigation of Iban oral traditions, particularly among *lemambang* there. Some of Masing's informants were once students of Igoh, and one of them, Sanggau, provided Masing with his last episode of the *timang* (published as Part IX of Volume 2).

We have here an extraordinary example of oral literature of great power, passion, and beauty. One can appreciate the great care, commitment, and knowledge that has gone into the translation of the chant. As Masing indicates in his Preface, he along with Freeman did not intend to produce a literal, word-for-word translation of the *timbang*, but one which “captures its spirit and aesthetics” (p. xi). For those of us who have had to try to convey the meaning and significance of even the most basic concepts from one culture to another, one has to have a deep admiration for a translation which attempts to convey in a fluent and poetic form a piece of creative work, a product of the human imagination, developed and distilled in the context of a dynamic, restless, pre-literate pagan culture. However, what the translation cannot create, though Masing refers to it in his commentary, is the performance itself; as a piece of oral literature, the *timbang* has to be performed for and in interaction with an audience; in other words, it is located in a specific social and ritual context.

There are numerous memorable lines in the text; perhaps brief extracts will provide something of the flavour of the poetry since, for me, this is the lasting contribution of Masing’s work:

Leaving sleeping places perfumed by the fragrant fruits of the mango
 The abode of the sensuous maiden Tingang Belangkah, whose lover
 flees not, even at the ominous falling of trees
 And whose bed is so profusely set about with flowers that none re-
 main to be gathered
 Leaving the hearth well-trodden by cats
 Leaving the firewood stacked layer on layer, just as is driftwood
 Leaving the racks, horned like goats, from which the water gourds
 hang.

Here is another example:

Ketupong leaps onto a rock the size of a massive jar
 Its slopes are lit by the waxing moon
 Its base by the gleaming of myriad stars
 Its dark peak hidden in a canopy of trees
 Beragai leaps to the base of this huge rock as big as a farmhouse
 Its slopes are lit by the crescent moon
 Its base by the glimmering of distant stars

Its peak flat, like the broad brim of a sun-hat
 Bejampong leaps to the base of this white rock, which is bleached like
 a hank of cotton
 Its slopes are lit by the waning moon
 Its peak shining as if encrusted with polished lead
 Papau leaps to this tapering rock, a lake of mud about its base
 Its slopes lit by the soft light of the moon
 Its base by the stars of the night
 Its peak bulges out like a lump of tobacco under the upper lip of a
 shaman.

Therefore, the main contribution of this study is the translation of the chant as an outstanding example of oral literature. Much more could have been said about the religious and ritual background to the *timang*. However, there is more than sufficient information here for the non-specialist to be able to appreciate the importance and meaning of the text. Masing presents details of the main Iban ritual activities, the kinds and structure of invocatory chants, the training and qualities of bards, and the position and role of the ritual (*gawai amat*) and *timang* in traditional Iban society. He notes that, despite the fact that the *timang* contains many words, phrases, images and concepts which are comprehended only by the initiated, these chants are appreciated at different levels by both young and old. They can be enjoyed as epic tales of gods (*petara*), spirits (*antu*), and culture heroes (*orang panggau*), containing references to supernatural beings and events important in Iban religion and oral history; they are also apprehended as poetical pieces, delivered in “a free-flowing style” (p. 2), with end-rhymes, internal rhymes and rhythm, and rhyme patterns, which demonstrate the beauty and lyrical quality of the Iban language. Above all, the *timang gawai amat* has to be understood in the context of traditional Iban history and culture. In the nineteenth century the ancestors of the Baleh Iban were moving into the primary forests of the Rejang basin, colonizing large tracts of territory, clearing the vegetation to cultivate hill *padi*, fighting against other peoples, many of whom resisted the Iban advance, and engaging in head-hunting raids. The Iban moved against such settled communities as the sago-cultivating Kanowit, Lugat, and Tanjong; forest hunter-gatherers, including the Bhuket and Punan; and their most formidable

opponents, the rice-cultivating Kayan. The *timbang gawai amat*, which was “a protracted allegory based on hill *padi* farming” (p. xi), was delivered in a ritual to honour the Iban god of war, Singalong Burong (Lang), and his sons-in-law who appear to the Iban in animal form as omen-birds. The overriding purpose of the ritual in its traditional setting was to call upon the gods, particularly Lang, to bestow supernatural powers and charms on Iban warriors. With this divine intervention and support the Iban would, with confidence, strength, and spiritual vigour, face and overcome their opponents. The *timbang gawai amat* is also “the most potent of curses” (p. 81). The chants are delivered against one’s enemies in order to weaken their souls so that they might be more easily and speedily vanquished. Such is the power of words in Iban culture that it is believed that they can realize that which they state or claim to be so.

In addition, for the Iban warrior and head-hunter sponsoring the ritual, this lavish and elaborate religious event served as a public demonstration of success and prestige, in this classless and egalitarian society in which acclaim and leadership was based on individual achievement and a continuous demonstration of personal prowess. Subsequently, with the disappearance of warfare and head-hunting the *gawai amat* has continued to be important as a means both to secure and demonstrate success in various “modern” endeavours (in business, politics, education, and urban-based activities).

Masing reflects on the position in Iban culture and society of *timbang* and *gawai* at the present time (or at least in the late 1970s and early 1980s). He points to the obvious effects of education and literacy on an oral medium, and that there has been a decline in interest among Iban youth in learning and sustaining their oral traditions. Yet with a note of optimism, he points to the continuing relevance of the chants and rituals, particularly as a means to maintain Iban identity; he also suggests that “it is quite possible, given the ingenuity of their *lemambang*, that the *gawai* and its *timbang* will be so modified as to gain new significance in the radically changed circumstances of the Iban people” (p. 121). Well, I am a little less hopeful, and that is why it is essential that the efforts of such local scholars as Masing remain undiminished

and that as much of the oral traditions of the Iban can be recorded, transcribed, and translated and their meaning and significance to lay Iban and non-Iban alike conveyed and explained. This is an enormous and arduous task, particularly given the fact (as Masing indicates) that there is no definitive, authentic, or correct version of a *timbang*, since imagination, creativity, and innovation are the true skills of the bard.

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