Sociolinguistics of the spectres: Perspectives of the Ibans of Sarawak

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Declaration

I declare that I conducted this research by myself throughout the entire journey of my PhD studies, and none of the work in this thesis has been submitted for any other degree at any other university. All the processes, including data collection and writing this thesis, have been completed by me, Leelajini Paranjothy.

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Dedication

To my mother, Lendai @ Rendai Lambat, a fearless Iban woman who broke the cycle of poverty by going to school. And my four-year-old son, Murat who loves scribbling mummy's books, while waiting for cuddles.

Abstract

Sociolinguistics of the spectres: Perspectives of the Ibans of Sarawak

This study explores the sociolinguistics of spectres within the cultural context of the Iban in Sarawak. Like many societies worldwide, the Iban view the voices of gods, ancestors, dreams, spirits, and ghosts as inherent components of both their everyday and ceremonial experiences. These voices, representing the continuum of past, present, and future, (Deumert, 2022, p. 4), are encountered through ritual practices. Contrary to Western perspectives that may dismiss such narratives as accounts of supernatural phenomena and therefore not inherently "real" or "true," this study employs the framework of the 'sociolinguistics of the spectre', (Deumert, 2018, 2022) to interpret these narrated voices as integral to the lived experiences of the Ibans. Central to this investigation are the narratives shared by nine participants regarding their ritual practices and beliefs. The study seeks to understand how the Ibans articulate their encounters with the voices of gods, ancestors, dreams, spirits, and ghosts. Moreover, it aims to explore the evolving nature of Iban ritual beliefs and practices, as well as the perspectives of the community on these changes. Adopting an insider-researcher stance, this study contributes novel insights into Iban ritual beliefs and practices. By examining the attitudes towards changing ritual dynamics within the community, it sheds light on the intricate interplay between tradition and modernity within Iban society. Through this exploration, the thesis aims to enrich our understanding of cultural dynamics and the complexities of belief systems in the contemporary world.

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Glossary of Iban terms

Apai biak : Younger father

Apai tuai: Elder father

Adat: in the Iban socio-legal context, *Adat* generally refers to law, rules, customs, procedures, rituals, ethics, values, sanction, and prohibitions (taboos).

Aki: Grandfather

Antu pala: skulls of slain enemies kept as trophies or symbols of bravery and valour in wars, as well as for other cultural and spiritual purposes

Antu: ghost

Asi pulut: glutinous rice

Aum Bala Manang: shaman congregation

Bedara' mansau: rituals involving the community

Bedara' mata: family-oriented rituals

Bilek: room

Biku Bunsu Petara: God of Nature

Baju burong: traditional Iban male attire

Bangsa: race

Bungai: flower

Bunsu Betutu Raja Runtu: Spirit of the fish

Bunsu Gerama: Spirit of the crab

Bunsu Manuk: Spirit of the cockerel

Bunsu Tekuyong: Spirit of the snail

Bunsu Ular: Spirit of the snake

Buah pinang: betel nuts

Bulu manuk: bird feather

Burong: bird

Daun apung: leaves for wrapping cigarettes

Dua: two

Engkah: to put

Ensera kelulu: radio programme about the art of Iban storytelling/oral tradition

Enselan: offering

Idup: alive

Indai tuai: Older mother

Ini: Grandmother

Kelam Ai: dispute resolution through trial by water wherein the party who remains underwater the longest wins the trial (the trial was normally performed by representatives for the disputing parties)

Kening: eyebrow

Ketupat: rice steamed in wrapped leaves

Kitai: we

Lapan: eighth

Lemanbang: bard

Lupung: shamanic satchel

Manang: shaman or spiritual healer

Manang bali: male shaman possessed by a female spirit

Mandai jenoh: afterlife

Mati: dead

Melah Pinang: formalisation of marriage that climaxes with cutting a betel nut or areca nut (*pinang*) into pieces during Iban wedding rituals.

Mensia: human

Meri': give

Mimpi rawan: anxiety dreams

Mimpi: dreams

Miring: invocation of the gods

Nampok: significant healing ritual

Nendak: white-rumped shama (bird)

Ngabang: visit

Ngambi petara ngabang: inviting the pantheon of gods and spirits to attend rituals or religious ceremonies

Ngelalu petara: welcoming gods

Ngepan: traditional Iban female attire

Ngirup: drink

Nimang jalong: significant ritual to appease the dead

Orang Panggau: intermediaries between humankind and the gods in the sky, a third major category of supernatural beings in Iban cosmology

Padi: paddy

Pantar: main pillar of a longhouse

Pengambi: the taker

Pengap: chant

Pengawa: works

Penghulu: chief

Penuh: full

Petara: gods

Pelian: subsequent existence of chants

Piring: food offerings

Pua kumbu: single warp ikat textile woven on a backstrap floor loom by Iban women of Sarawak

Puni: An Iban taboo where mishap can occur to someone who skips a meal after stating an intention to eat

Raja Jagu: King of the Crocodile

Ranyai: The handmade trees that people put it on the centre of the *ruai*, especially during *Gawai* festival

Rendai: rice pops

Ruai: common gallery in a longhouse

Rumah panjai: longhouse

Sabak: elegy or poem of lament for the dead that narrates the journey of his/her soul from the land of the living and the dead

Sampi: chants

Sampi: invocation chants

Sebayan: the land of the living and the dead

Semakau: tobacco

Semengat: spirit

Sempulang Gana: Iban gods

Serara bungai: separation of a recently deceased

Singalang Burong: Iban gods

Sirih: gambier leaves

Sugi sakit: a *Gawai* subordinate in the form of a healing rite

Taba: site

Tauka: or

Temenggong: state-appointed community leader in charge of Iban longhouses on a specific river

Telu: eggs

Tiang pengingat: remembrance pole

Timang: chant

Timang gawai amat: significant harvest ritual

Tujuh: seven

Tukang sabak: soul guide

Tumpi: rice cakes

Tuai burong: person responsible for safeguarding ritual welfare

Tuai rumah: longhouse headman

Urang: person

Chapter One: Research background

"Write this down, are you writing this down? Write this down. If I die, there is no one left to tell you this story" Cherang

Introduction

This dissertation explores the beliefs and practices of the Ibans, particularly their *miring* ritual (invocation of the gods), through the lens of sociolinguistics. Sociolinguistics, the study of language in its social environment, often attends to how language reflects and shapes societal norms and cultural practices. Tirvassen (2018) argued that prescriptive sociolinguistic theories can sometimes limit researchers' perspectives by stressing conceptual frameworks that may simplify intricate social realities (Tirvassen, 2018, pp. 1-2). However, Ana Deumert's (2018, 2022) concept of the "spectral turn" introduces a new dimension to the field: examining the invisible and inaudible forces—spectres—that influence social communication. Through interviews with nine Iban participants, I draw on Deumert's (2018) concept that "the spectral turn moves beyond the rational enlightenment subject, encouraging exploration of what is largely invisible and inaudible yet still possesses transformative power, shaping and framing social practices." Deumert's (2022) perspective "it recognizes the sensuous and affective aspects of social life, rejecting the 'boundaries, binaries, and demarcations' tied to the linear temporality of modernity" (Garuba, 2013, p. 50 in Deumert, 2022, p. 2). The data in this thesis argues for acknowledgement of spectral communication and spectral thinking, in investigating how the Ibans engage with their gods, spirits and ancestors.

Through my interview data, this dissertation draws on Deumert's (2018, 2022) framework to argue that *miring* rituals represent a form of spectral communication, where the Ibans interact with gods, spirits, and ancestors. The research contributes to sociolinguistics by illuminating how trans-human (beyond human) communication is central to Iban cultural and spiritual practices. By investigating how spectral thinking informs *miring* rituals, this thesis expands sociolinguistic inquiry to include non-visible and non-verbal modes of communication.

1.1 Background: The Ibans of Sarawak and *miring* (invocation of the gods)

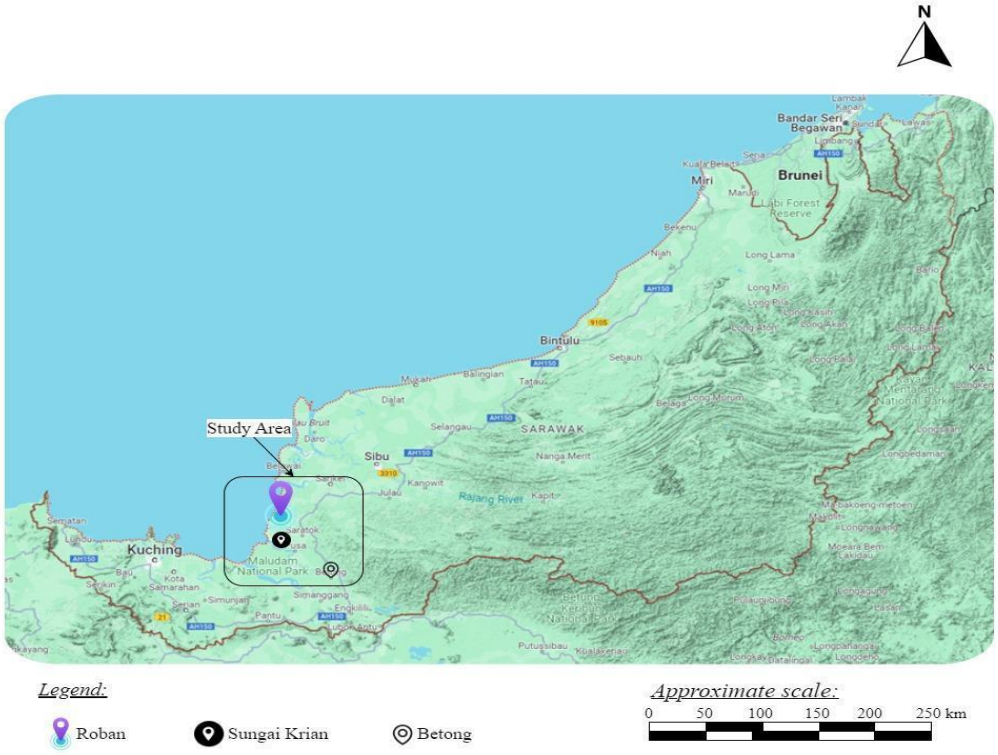

Figure 1.1: Map of Sarawak, Borneo, with a focus on the research site, Ibans, on the Krian River. *Source*: Google Earth.

This study is situated in Sarawak, a Malaysian state in the island of Borneo. Recent statistics show a population of over 2.6 million made up of 26 different ethnic groups (Statistical Department 2015). Around 40% of Sarawak's inhabitants are non-Muslim Indigenous communities collectively called *Dayaks*. The Iban, who are also known as the *Sea Dayaks*, comprise 31% of the total state population. The Ibans epitomise a longstanding tradition of communal living in vast longhouses deeply intertwined with the natural environment of the surrounding forests (Freeman 1960; 1961; 1970).

At the heart of Iban cosmology lies the concept of spectres, or ethereal beings that permeate the fabric of everyday life and communication. In this context, the sociolinguistics of the spectres comes into play. It shaped the ways of life unfolding within the longhouse, influencing not only the transmission of traditional knowledge and cultural norms but also the negotiation of social hierarchies and power dynamics. The Ibans establish a symbiotic relationship with the spectral realm through rituals and oral traditions, seeking guidance and protection from ancestral spirits and deities (Freeman 1960; 1961; 1970). As custodians of their cultural

heritage, they navigate a complex sociolinguistic landscape where the spectral and material worlds intertwine.

In his seminal work *The coming of the gods*, James Jemut Masing elucidates the profound significance of *miring* within the historical and cultural context of the Ibans. Masing delineates how the Ibans, historically renowned as adept cultivators reliant on the bounty of the jungle, were driven into tribal conflicts over land ownership and prestige. In times of strife, they sought the aid of Singalang Burong, the high god of war, whose divine intervention was invoked through the eloquent chants of the *lemambang*. These invocatory rituals depicted the mythical journey of Singalang Burong and his entourage, underscoring the deeply rooted Iban belief in a symbiotic relationship between the gods, ancestors, and human affairs. *Miring* thus emerged as an indispensable aspect of Iban culture, serving as a conduit for communication with the divine realm. Despite the challenges of modernity and shifting cultural landscapes, the Ibans persist in their devotion to *miring* rites, seeking divine approval, protection, and healing from their gods and ancestors, (Sather, 2001; Sutlive and Sutlive, 2001; Hasegawa, 2018).

This study uses Deumert's (2018, 2022) framework to explore how these forms of spectral communication are integral to the Iban's sociolinguistic landscape, emphasising that communication is not confined to human interlocutors but also involves trans-human interactions. The study will explore the interplay of spectral communication, spectral thinking, and hauntology within the domain of ritual, shedding light on the nuanced interconnections between seen and unseen realms in Iban cosmology.

1.2 Researcher background and motivation for the study

My research journey towards understanding the sociolinguistics of the spectres of the Iban was supported by personal connections and experiences growing up in the Iban community in Krian, Sarawak. I was born to a West Malaysian Indian father and a Sarawakian Iban mother, the latter side of the family, of whom my research is focused on. My formative years unfolded in Saratok, where my mother served as a nursing sister in charge of the local hospital from 1985 to 1992. Our family lived very near to our longhouse in Roban, where my grandfather would take my younger brother and I back to the longhouse using the Sarawak Transport Company (STC) bus services. Despite my mixed parentage, my linguistic repertoire was shaped literally by my mother’s tongue as I grew up primarily within the Iban community.

I grew up very familiar with *miring*. My memories of witnessing my grandfather conduct *miring* ceremonies during *Gawai* (harvest festivals) and other significant life events underscored the integral role of the *miring* rituals in Iban way of living and spiritual life. Despite not fully grasping their significance at the time, I recall the reverence and respect accorded to my grandfather. This highlighted the communal importance of his leadership and expertise in performing the rituals in our longhouse.

After I completed primary school at Saint Peter's Saratok, my grandfather performed an elaborate *miring nganjung anak sekula* (a ritual for sending a child to school). This was because I had been selected by The Sarawak Foundation for a student exchange programme in 1991. The ritual epitomises the enduring significance of *miring* when it comes to marking important life transitions within the community. The inclusion of family members and the entire longhouse within the ritual signifies the communal nature of these ceremonies, which symbolised collective support and blessings for the individual embarking on a new journey. My recollections of the sacrificial offering and the reading of the pig liver during the *miring* ceremony evoke the intricacy of the symbolic aspects within these rituals. Ritualistic practices, such as offering food and interpreting omens, reflect the interconnectedness of the spiritual and mundane realms in Iban cosmology.

Another poignant moment occurred when my father was hospitalised in Kuching in 2004. During the same period, one of my *apai tuai* (elder father) spotted an injured pangolin on his way to his farm that subsequently passed away. He interpreted the death of the animal as a foreboding omen and promptly informed our family in the longhouse in Roban. They swiftly responded by travelling to Kuching where tragically, upon their arrival, they found that my father had already passed away. The experience pointed out the tangible impact of omens brought by animals, illustrating the strength of the belief in spectral communication and significance of interpretations of omens within the Iban community.

Overall, these personal recollections serve as a poignant reminder of the cultural heritage and traditions that have shaped my identity and worldview. They highlight the profound influence of *miring* in my life, underscoring the importance of preserving and understanding these cultural practices. Consequently, they provide a compelling source of motivation for my current study of *miring* and the sociolinguistics of the spectres as I seek to explore deeper into the cultural significance and implications of these rituals within the Iban community.

1.3 Research questions and contributions

1.3.1 Research question one: How do Ibans describe their *miring* practices?

This first question aims to capture the detailed descriptions and narratives provided by the Iban people regarding their *miring* practices. The research probes into the way of the Iban living that defines these *miring* ceremonies by understanding how Ibans articulate these rituals. From a sociolinguistic perspective, this question investigates how cultural and social meanings are constructed and transmitted through ritual. This resonates with the sociolinguistics of the spectres, as outlined by Deumert (2022), which explores how non-visible and non-audible forces influence social practices. Descriptions of *miring* include rice planting, welcoming guests, *Gawai Dayak* (harvest festival), the Iban longhouse, *piring* (food offering) and *kelam ai* (trial by water). These activities and the Iban way of living are essential in understanding how spectral communication and spectral thinking are embedded in the everyday sociolinguistic practices of the Iban community.

1.3.2 Research question two: How do Ibans say they communicate with spirits, gods, and ancestors?

This second question probes the ways through which the Ibans claim to interact with the spiritual world. It directly engages with the concept of spectral communication by focusing on how the Iban people communicate with entities beyond the physical and visible world. By exploring dreams, animal signs and interpreting animal offal, countering unruly spirits, mediation by ritual specialists - *lemambang-*, *sampi* (chants) and appeasing trophy heads, the research can shed light on strategies to bridge the human and spirit worlds. By focusing on these modes of communication, the study expands the scope of sociolinguistics to include spectral and trans-human communication, reinforcing Deumert's (2022) argument that non-visible and non-verbal forces shape social practices and cultural identity.

Deumert (2022) stresses on the need to move beyond conventional linguistic boundaries and consider the invisible and inaudible modalities involved in semiosis, (p.1). Both research questions align with this perspective by investigating how the Ibans describe and practise their *miring* rituals and communicate with the spiritual realm. These questions allow for an exploration of the affective and sensuous nature of these practices, reflecting Deumert's (2022) focus on the interconnectedness of social life and spectral communication, (p.2).

By addressing these research questions, my study strives to uncover the underlying sociolinguistic mechanisms that facilitate spectral communication in the Iban community. It will highlight how ritual practices are intertwined with the cultural and spiritual life of the Ibans, thus contributing to a deeper understanding of the sociolinguistics of the spectres in the context of *miring* rituals.

1.4. Overview of literature review and methodology

This study explores the sociolinguistics of the spectres using the *miring* rituals of the Ibans to understand the voices of gods and ancestors, and the significance of dreams in Iban culture. Drawing from Derridean perspectives, it frames the investigation within Ana Deumert's 2002 work *The sound of absent-presence*. Her work critiques traditional sociolinguistic methodologies to advocate for deeper exploration of spectral scholarship and spectral thinking (Deumert 2022, p. 6). Building on this, Deumert's examination of language practices that challenge monoglossic norms, (Deumert 2022: p.15) provides a valuable lens through which to view Iban *miring* rituals as a form of spectral communication. Such an investigation would explore how these rituals facilitate interactions not only among individuals but also between the material and spiritual realms. This embodies a sociolinguistic haunting, where the ancestral spirits are actively called upon.

Methodologically, the research entailed gathering narratives from nine participants through online interviews, which was necessary given constraints imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic. It is worth noting that the kinship connection within the Iban community subject to study here comprises my maternal relatives. By incorporating kinship connections into the study, the research provides a comprehensive examination of the sociolinguistics of the spectres within Iban culture.

Furthermore, influenced by the concept of hauntology—the presence of historical elements shaping current and future realities—my research can burrow into how Iban *miring* practices encapsulate cultural memories and histories that continue to influence contemporary social and cultural identities. This analysis would highlight the dynamic interplay between past beliefs and current practices, illustrating how these traditions are not static relics but active forces that both inform and are reformed by the evolving contours of Iban life. This integrated approach will enrich my understanding of how spectral communications within Iban *miring* practices are

not merely cultural artefacts but are vibrant engagements with the community's past, present, and future.

1.5 Ontological and epistemological nature

The Iban *miring* ritual raises questions about its impact and rationale, much like many other rituals across different cultures. People often wonder whether these rituals are effective or simply symbolic. They question how simple acts like pouring water or exchanging vows can have profound effects. Etim (2019) proposes the idea that rituals, whether in advanced or less developed societies, have always posed deep questions about their meaning and effectiveness due to their mysterious nature, symbolic connections, and close ties to belief systems. In studying African cultures, Etim (2019) found the idea of rituals complex because of the unique way of blending metaphysical and knowledge-related ideas which can make rituals seem mysterious to outsiders (Etim, 2019:2).

According to Etim (2019), understanding the fundamental relationship among beings hinges on recognising *force* as the primary causal and unifying factor. Force, encompassing concepts such as life, energy, power, and dynamism, permeates all existence, determining their existence and vitality. From the lowest to the highest beings, each entity possesses a degree of force, shaping the diversity of existence. At the pinnacle stands a supreme Spirit or Force, including God, deities, ancestral spirits, and human spirits. Animals, living beings, and even inanimate objects are imbued with their respective forces. Etim's findings points out the importance of intermediary beings such as ancestors and minor deities in accessing the Supreme Being, (Etim, 2019: 6-7).

The discussions by Etim (2019) about the profound nature of rituals and their significance in various societies resonate strongly with the ontology of the Iban *miring* ritual in Borneo. In the realm of spectral communication and ritual manifestations, where rituals serve as a means of connecting with spiritual realms or entities, the questions surrounding their efficacy and rationale echo those raised in African ritual practices. Ritual mediators, who facilitate communication between the human and spiritual realms, play a crucial role in both African and Iban ritual contexts.The concept of ritualisation has also been explored by Bell (1992), who describes ritualisation as a concept rooted in practice theory, defining it as a specific type of strategic action that people engage in to address particular circumstances they encounter (Bell, 1992:92). When applied to the study of the Iban *miring* ritual and the sociolinguistics of

spectres, this definition provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the intricate dynamics at play.

Ontologically, the *miring* ritual represents a manifestation of the Iban worldview, where spiritual forces are intricately intertwined with everyday life. Similarly, the study of spectres within Iban culture research into the ontology of spiritual entities and their interactions with human society. Epistemologically, Bell's emphasis on understanding rituals within their real context resonates with the need to explore how the *miring* ritual and spectres are perceived and understood by the Iban people. This involves examining the experiences, interpretations, and impacts of these phenomena on individuals and communities, both prior to and after their occurrence. Moreover, Bell's insights into the differentiation of ritual from other forms of action highlight the unique cultural significance attributed to the *miring* ritual and the sociolinguistic practices surrounding spectres within Iban society. Through this lens, scholars gain deeper insights into the ontology and epistemology of Iban culture, unravelling the complex relationship between ritual practices, spiritual beliefs, and cultural knowledge.

In additional ontological and epistemological considerations, certain aspects of my research look into accounts related to dreams, spirits, and spiritual pantheons. Previous research such as the inquiry by I'Anson & Jasper (2017) into the existence of jinn (sometimes referred to as genies in English) may seem disconnected from everyday life, yet it holds significance in contexts such as diagnosing mental illness. I'Anson & Jasper (2017) referred to studies conducted in the UK reveal that ill Black and Asian patients are more inclined to attribute their symptoms to supernatural causes, whereas White patients tend to perceive them as biological. This discrepancy influences their treatment, with Black and Asian patients often experiencing more faith-based encounters. Despite patient preferences for doctors to understand their beliefs, medical professionals frequently adhere to their own biomedical perspectives, disregarding alternative explanations for illness. Western medicine's tendency to overlook diverse interpretations of illness demonstrates a reluctance to acknowledge supernatural phenomena as real, leading to a dismissal of patients' beliefs as mere products of their minds, (I'Anson and Jasper, 2017, pp.122-123) The ontological connection emerges from the impact of diverse cultural beliefs about the supernatural, such as the belief in jinn, on individuals' perceptions and explanations of illness. In communities where supernatural causes are considered genuine, they significantly shape individuals' approaches to seeking treatment (I'Anson & Jasper, 2017: p.123-125). Sather (2001) found that according to Iban beliefs, there are two concurrent realities that exist. In one reality, individuals interact with the physical and social world,

including living beings, plants, animals, and inanimate objects, while in the other reality, known as the dream reality of the soul, the soul engages with other souls, spirits, and ancestral spirits. Although these two realities are distinct in some respects, they also overlap and share similarities, with every occurrence in one reality believed to have a corresponding counterpart in the other. Furthermore, the two realities are believed to be connected by principles of contrast and inversion. The Iban perceive these two worlds, the earthly realm, and the realm of souls, as being in relation to each other, (Barret, 1993; Sather, 2001: p.51-52). In both instances, the exploration of ontological and epistemological considerations reveals insights into the interplay between cultural beliefs and individual perceptions. The first context examines the coexistence of everyday reality and supernatural beliefs, particularly concerning the presence of jinn and their impact on illness perception. Meanwhile, the second scenario illustrates the simultaneous existence of the physical world and the dream reality of the soul within Iban beliefs. These discussions highlight a recognition of diverse realities beyond conventional understandings, emphasising the importance of cultural context and subjective experiences in shaping knowledge and perception.

My ontological stance, rooted in constructivism or social constructionism, resonates with the exploration of cultural beliefs surrounding supernatural phenomena like the existence of ghosts and spirits and the practice of *miring* rituals within the Iban community. Just as constructivism emphasises the subjective nature of reality and the influence of social and cultural context on individual experiences (source), my understanding of *miring* rituals acknowledges the deep cultural and personal meanings attached to these practices within my community. As an Iban woman, I recognise the multiplicity of perspectives and interpretations within my community, understanding that reality is socially constructed and may vary across different cultural contexts. This alignment underscores the importance of considering cultural nuances and lived experiences when investigating phenomena like the role of supernatural beliefs in shaping perceptions of illness and treatment-seeking behaviours among diverse cultural groups.

Building upon this ontological foundation, my epistemological position is characterised by a form of situated or insider knowledge. As a member of the Iban community, I possess firsthand experience and intimate familiarity with our cultural norms, practices, and values. This insider knowledge grants me access to unique insights that may elude external researchers, mostly because of what Chavez (2008, p. 482) calls “expediency of access”. Moreover, my research is guided by a reflexive approach, where I acknowledge my own subjectivity and positionality within the research process. By maintaining continuity from ontological considerations to

epistemological positioning, my approach ensures a holistic understanding of the cultural phenomena under investigation.

1.6 Thesis structure

This study is structured to provide an exploration of the sociolinguistics of the spectres and the Ibans of Sarawak. It examines nine interview transcripts and employs a data led exploration to discern the intricacies of spectral communication and spectral thinking. The analysis here adopts the 'sociolinguistics of the spectre' to interpret the narrated voices of gods, ancestors, dreams, spirits, and ghosts as integral to lived experience.

Following the introduction, the thesis will present seven chapters:

Chapters Two and Three present the literature reviews that form the theoretical structure of the thesis. They shed light on Derrida's perspectives, the exploration of Deumert's (2018, 2022) sociolinguistics of the spectres, global indigenous context and Iban literatures that support their way of living alongside their spectral beliefs.

Chapter Four serves as the methodological backbone of this research, offering a detailed examination of the study's ontological and epistemological underpinnings and methodological framework. I then detailed the chapter by providing a view on insider and kinship research. I proceeded to elucidate critical aspects of the research design, discussing interviews, participant recruitment, data collection, and data analysis procedures. The latter part of this chapter focuses on researcher reflexivity and ethical considerations, such as consent and the co-construction of knowledge with participants.

Chapters Five, Six and Seven account for the analytical core of this thesis. Probing into spectral communication and spectral thinking within Deumert's (2018, 2022) sociolinguistics of the spectres, Chapter Five explores spectral thinking and communication, analysing and discussing dreams, animal signs, and offal interpretations, countering unruly spirits, and exploring the Iban spiritual pantheon. Transitioning to Chapter Six, the focus shifts to the ritual manifestations of spectral communication, analysing the role of rituals in various contexts such as rice planting, welcoming guests and weddings, *Gawai* festivities, and the *miring* within the longhouse. Chapter Seven serves as a conduit for understanding the mediators of spectral

communication, exploring the pivotal roles played by -*lemambang*-ritual specialists, *sampi*, and trophy heads in facilitating communication with the spectral realm. Through these analytical chapters, this thesis investigates the complex nuances of spectral communication and spectral thinking within the sociolinguistic landscape of the Ibans, offering insights into their *miring* rituals.

In Chapter Eight, the last chapter, I offer a summary of my thesis and highlight important findings that align with Deumert's (2018, 2022) sociolinguistics of the spectres, within the context of the Ibans. I provide the main points of the study and new perspectives that contribute to the field.

Chapter Two: The Sociolinguistics of the Spectres

"We are opening this world, we would cultivate it, we would harvest it, we would plant, and if you spirits are here, and this is your land, and this is your home, we seek your forgiveness and we offer to you this piring, it is an offering in return for your forgiveness," Belayong's brief chant offering food appeasing a land guardian.

Introduction

This chapter explores the sociolinguistics of the spectres and its interaction with Iban ritual. I respond to Ana Deumert's (2018, 2022) notion of trans-human agency or speaking and listening beyond the human. In my own investigation, I seek to elucidate the Iban way of living, integrating its spiritual pantheon through their *miring* practices. To illustrate the relevance of this analytical approach, I refer to examples from the interview data.

Imre Szeman (2000) claims that the current era appears marked by a peculiar phenomenon wherein ghosts, which once existed between this world and the next, have taken on a historical significance. The roles of the tangible and the spectral seem to have been reversed, with the ethereal gaining more substance while the material fades away, leaving only faint traces, (Szeman, 2000, p.104). Existing sociolinguistic paradigms have been the subject of considerable efforts to form a more established theoretical methodological framework that includes sociolinguistics of the spectres, (Szeman, 2000; Cameron, 2008; Hollan, 2020; Deumert, 2022). Within this framework, scholarly ideas are evolving. My research will address this phenomenon in the spectral realm that has always been part of the Iban way of life. Exploration of this realm is only a matter of understanding and acknowledging the meaningful relationship between the Ibans and their spectres. For this reason, I begin the literature review by explaining the concepts underlying the sociolinguistics of the spectres.

2.1 Derrida's spectres

'To exorcise not in order to chase away the ghosts, but this time to grant them right…to… a hospitable memory…out of concern for justice,' (Derrida, 1993, in Gordon, 2008, p.58)

Early scholarly efforts to put together a more established theoretical framework around the sociolinguistics of the spectres, were grounded in Jacques Derrida's (1993) work *Spectres of Marx*. This work is important for its transformative impact on our understanding of language,

meaning, and reality. While his ideas sparked both admiration and criticism, his philosophy challenged foundational concepts in Western philosophy that included notions of presence, identity, and truth. Derrida (1993) uses the idea of spectres and phantoms to probe any traces of Marxism continuing to haunt Western society, suggesting that by the time Marxism was declared dead, capitalism was thriving. Derrida discusses the notion of the ghost or spectre as a metaphorical representation of the past, presenting Marx's ideas and the spectre of Communism as continuing to haunt aspects of contemporary political, cultural, and economic life. Essentially, he suggested that the spectre of Communism continued despite its collapse in many countries. He also criticised the idea of a linear and progressive history, stating that historical memory was complex, and the past would continue to haunt the present. Derrida argued that Marx's critical assessment of capitalism and class struggle should be understood in the context of this ongoing haunting. It should thus be reconsidered, especially in terms of the role of ghosts and spectres shaping our understanding of the world (Derrida 1993).

Gayatri Spivak, in her seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), offers a critical examination of various intellectual traditions, including Derrida's earlier ideas. Spivak engages with Derrida's theories of deconstruction, critiquing the Western philosophical frameworks for their limitations in addressing the voices and experiences of marginalised groups. She observed that Eurocentrism and ethnocentrism in Derrida's work might prevent deconstruction from adequately addressing the experiences and perspectives of the marginalised. Spivak called for a more inclusive and globally aware approach to theory.

Her criticisms were not a rejection of Derrida's work but an extension, aiming to apply his ideas to the specific challenges of postcolonial and feminist studies. Spivak emphasised that without addressing the concrete realities and histories of oppression, deconstruction risks becoming an intellectual exercise detached from the lived experiences of those it seeks to represent. Her work has played a significant role in adapting and contextualising deconstruction within these fields, highlighting the ethical and political dimensions of intellectual inquiry and underscoring the importance of giving voice to the subaltern in academic discourse.

In this vein, Davis (2005) acknowledged the futility of Derrida's rehabilitation of ghosts and extended this evaluation by examining the roles of spectres and phantoms in literature and cultural theory. Hauntology, according to Davis (2005), is part of an effort to raise the stakes in literary studies to interrogate our relationships to the dead, uncover the hidden identities of the living, and explore the boundaries between what is thought and unthought. In this sense,

the ghost is a focal point for competing perspectives on epistemology and ethics (Davis 2005, p. 379). He ventured into the works of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok (2005), which discuss transgenerational communication, to examine how the secret traumas of past generations (a phantom, in their terms) might disturb the lives of their descendants (Davis 2005, p. 374). Davis held that this phantom resides in what's called the living Ego, actively suppressing shameful secrets and traumas. This view offered a novel explanation for ghost stories, which can be understood as mediating the encrypted secrets of past generations through fiction. Ultimately, Davis claimed that Abraham and Torok's ideas renewed psychoanalytic theory when it came to addressing transgenerational trauma and family secrets.

In literary terms, the association with haunting was mostly Eurocentric and seen in a negative light, given the uncovering of uncomfortable secrets. The Ibans believe that the idea of 'religion' is a creation of those who speak English and stands in opposition to cultural classifications, such as headhunting (see Section 2.13). From the Iban perspective, there are no clear distinctions between these activities and what could be categorised as religious practices. Sutlive and Sutlive (2001) observe that religious beliefs and actions are deeply integrated into every facet of the Iban lifestyle. They thus identify a gap in comprehending Iban culture and its ritual aspects – one that requires attention (Sutlive and Sutlive 2001, pp. 772–773).

Cameron (2008) refers to ghosts as disrupting the assumed stability and integrity of Western notions of time and space, highlighting a discrepancy between the ideal and the real, or the present and the absent. Her work examines the political implications of characterising Indigenous peoples as either ghostly or haunting entities. She examines the historical use of haunting tropes within the production of Canadian culture and a then-recent resurgence of the spectral Indigenous figure, including its presence in a wilderness park in the lower mainland of British Columbia. For her, the deployment of haunting tropes in understanding contemporary settlers–Indigenous relations reinforce structures of colonial power and fails to adequately acknowledge the unique experiences and claims of Indigenous communities. She reflected on Derrida's view that ghosts disturb any attempts at closure and finality, noting that it is only through acknowledgment of, dialogue with, and accommodation for our ghosts that we can learn how to navigate and thrive in a post-colonial era (Cameron 2008, p. 383). Here, my participants noted that being in conversation with elders through *miring* practices is a way of keeping the spirit of the community alive. This data was accompanied by several points about the White people who came to the region as missionaries.

Derridean philosophy provides the ground for understanding perceptions of ghosts or spirits in my investigation of Iban *miring*. A rigid adherence to Western philosophy when it comes to recognising concepts of presence and truth are consciously set aside. This, in turn, will lead to a fuller understanding into the Iban way of living within the spheres of their natural environment and spiritual pantheon. Although I do not study Iban literary works per se, I shed light on the oral traditions passed on from one generation to another through ritual chants. The narratives in my interviews are equivalent to literary works and, in both cases, the voice of the spectre carries value that should not be overlooked. Contrary to Western notions of haunting, the Ibans believe these spirits have never left our realm. Instead, they coexist with the Ibans in everyday life.

2.2 Spectral concerns

In her 2008 book *Ghostly matters*, Avery Gordon looks into a concept of haunting (and its implications for understanding social phenomena) intricately tied to this understanding of Derridean philosophy. In doing so, she explores how the metaphor of haunting can illuminate hidden, suppressed, and overlooked aspects of social life. The book sheds light on how spectres, ghosts, and haunting can be used as metaphors to reveal the presence of unresolved issues from the past, collective traumas, and suppressed memories in modern societies. She argues that ghosts are not simply supernatural entities, but also symbolic representations of past injustices, silenced voices, and forgotten narratives that continue to affect the present. Combining sociological analysis with personal reflection and literary exploration, Gordon provides a multidimensional perspective on haunting and how it disrupts conventional narratives.

In the foreword to *Ghostly matters*, Janice Radway states that "because the past always haunts the present, sociology must imaginatively engage those apparitions, those ghosts that tie present subjects to past histories" (Gordon 2008, p. viii). Gordon draws on Derridean ideas, particularly those related to spectrality, haunting, and relations between the past and the present, to develop her own sociological and critical framework. My study intends to illuminate how *miring* rituals impart a narrative that diverges from the assertion that 'ghosts are actually stuff we are hiding', a sort of unresolved memory or collective trauma. Instead, my participants

shared stories of *miring* as part of growing up in the longhouse and as an important ritual for healing, planting, and harvests.

Radway further notes that "the ghost is not simply a dead or missing person, but a social figure, and investigating it can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life" (Gordon 2008, p. 8). Such statements underpin an approach that led to my research data and illuminated the relationship between the Ibans, and their spectres enacted through *miring* practices. Gordon (2011) in a later article *Some Thoughts on Haunting and Futurity* offered more reflexivity and a review her book in 2008 through two case studies: one on the transatlantic slave trade and the other on political repression and state terror in 1970s Latin America. She refers to haunting as an animated state in which repressed or unresolved social violence makes itself known by raising spectres; this alters the "experience of being" in linear time (Gordon 2011, p. 2). To her, the ghost commands a real presence that demands its due – it requires attention rather than simply existing as the unknown or unknowable in a Derridean sense. Ultimately, Gordon suggests that both the act of haunting and spectres themselves are each very much alive and present (2011, p. 2).

In this sense, Gordon almost equates haunting to trauma. But in acknowledging that trauma can be misaligned with the temporality of experience and referencing Freudian studies, she extends this understanding to a society, or a person trapped in the past. This past is then repeated in a present or as a never-ending cycle. Gordon's engagement with Derrida is thus not a simple endorsement or rejection of his philosophy, but rather a creative appropriation and reinterpretation of some of his concepts to address her own research interests and sociological enquiries.

There are similarities between this notion of ghosts and Iban *miring* practices in the sense that both involve belief in the continuation or persistence of the past in the present. Iban *miring* involves rituals and offerings to communicate with ancestral spirits and deities, acknowledging their continued influence on daily life. As in Gordon's perspective on haunting, *miring* recognises the significance of past experiences and their impact on contemporary existence. Still, it is essential to note that the specific cultural and sociological contexts of Iban *miring* and Gordon's ideas about haunting differ significantly. Moreover, I seek to diverge from the ghosts of literary works and study this transgenerational communication by looking into the

narratives of my interviewees centred around *miring* rituals. My participants share stories about *miring* to appease land guardians and to seek help with justice, healing, and even decision-making.

Ana Deumert (2018) further details how spectres and supernatural entities serve as well-established conceptual tools within folklores and everyday settings. According to her, these concepts span Caribbean spirituality to mainstream American culture, including television and movies such as *the poltergeist*, *Sixth sense*, and *The X-files*. Ghostly phenomena, particularly disembodied voices, manifest in elements such as incomplete text , utterances, and remnants of speech. Deumert (2018) approached this through a spectral perspective wherein concepts of visibility and voice are intricately tied to a historical context, as per Gordon's *Ghostly matters* (2008). These notions form a complex system of permissions and prohibitions, presence, and absence (also see Section 2.4).

2.3 The ecology of haunting

Another phenomenon worth exploring is the role of ghosts and why they should matter in the Iban way of living. In a 2020 article titled "Who is haunted by whom? Steps to an ecology of haunting*"*, Douglas Hollan explores the concept of haunting and its implications from an anthropological perspective. Unpacking the complex interplay between the haunted, the haunter, and the observer, he aims to develop a more substantial understanding of haunting experiences. Hollan observes that the realm of ghosts has become a subject of significance in anthropology but adds that ghosts were never truly absent from the discipline, considering how many anthropologists have engaged with cultures that are intimately familiar with the existence of ghosts and other spiritual entities. The article investigates how haunting phenomena extend beyond mere interactions between humans and ghosts and suggests a more comprehensive approach to understanding hauntings – one that considers the broader social and cultural context in which such experiences occur.

Hollan (2020) argues that haunting can be used as a metaphor to represent experiences of loss, dispossession, injustice, and emotional turmoil. According to the narratives of my participants, *miring* can also be seen as a sort of metaphorical haunting because it involves rituals and practices that connect the living with their ancestors and spirits. The act of *miring* can further evoke feelings of loss or the presence of ancestors, symbolically haunting the living.

Hallowell (1955) long ago emphasised how even entities without physical forms can wield substantial social, psychological, and political influence within human societies and behavioural contexts. Hollan (2020) acknowledges that the apparitions and spirits featured in earlier ethnographies are genuinely regarded as having an ontological reality. These entities were profoundly social and displayed substantial familiarity in various aspects. While often invisible and unnoticed by most individuals (though sometimes perceived directly or interacted with in dreams), these spirits were potentially threatening and unsettling under specific circumstances. Still, their actions and conduct – even those characterised by malice and retribution – were generally seen as potentially comprehensible and predictable. This was true not only for practitioners, but also for shamanic healers or other types of specialists who grasped their behaviour. In cases of malevolence, there was typically a discernible motive behind it: perhaps the spirits were hungry and required appeasement or felt slighted and demanded reconciliation. Once appeased or resolved, the anger or hostility of the spirit would often subside, allowing for a state of relative harmony and coexistence with human communities (Hollan 2020, p. 452).

Hollan (2020) also clarified how the concept of haunting in hauntology literature differs in nature from previous forms. He does so with reference to Martha and Bruce Lincoln's article "Toward a critical hauntology", explaining that the Lincolns categorise haunting by actual ghosts as primary and by metaphorical ghosts as secondary. They then highlight the differing social, political, and moral implications of each kind.

The distinction between primary and secondary haunting becomes crucial when addressing a fundamental question posed by this literature: who is being haunted by whom, under what circumstances, and for what reasons? A Toraja man haunted by his vengeful father in a dream (see Hollan 2014) is distinct from someone haunted by the resurgence of Marxism (see Derrida 1994). This further differs from a secular state exploiting a belief in ghosts among its citizenry for its own agenda (see Kwon 2008). Still, these distinctions tend to be blurred in hauntology literature, where metaphorical extensions of ghosts inadvertently become concrete and an understanding of the genuine existence of certain ghosts can wane or remain unachieved.

The core argument here is that some of this conceptual confusion arises from the fact that the presence or absence of ghosts and associated hauntings always occur in relation *to* someone. Whether it is the person directly experiencing the haunting, an observer subsequently haunted by the primary haunting, or an external analyst seeking comprehension, the relational and

interpersonal dimensions of haunting must be considered. The fact that some individuals experience ghosts and hauntings while others under identical circumstances do not suggests that analyses of the intricate forces influencing the emergence and vanishing of ghosts must consider the intricacies of the emotional experiences of those being haunted. Contrary to Gordon's hopeful perspective on the persistence of ghosts and their role in enlightening us about justice and injustice, the argument presented here is that ghostly phenomena, whether real or metaphorical, possess a transitory nature.

Hollan's 2020 article underscores the need for a more interdisciplinary and holistic approach to study of haunting – one that draws insights from psychology, anthropology, sociology, and other disciplines. He postulates that the concept of haunting in the emerging hauntology literature differs in claiming that the haunting explored in recent studies was not centred around ontologically real ghosts, but around vague and elusive signs and remnants often politically and culturally suppressed by historical social inequalities and injustices. These signs and remnants encompassed unheard marginalised voices, denied or eroded livelihoods, shattered hopes and aspirations, withheld recognitions and celebrations, and essentially any past injustices left unnoticed and unresolved (Hollan 2020b, p. 452).

This claim echoes Derrida's *Spectres of Marx* (1993) wherein he introduced the term 'hauntology', and Avery Gordon's *Ghostly matters* (1997) – foundational texts for this new hauntology discourse. In this context, ghosts and spectres are not literal but metaphorical. They are invoked in the literature to conjure the ambiguous remnants of social injustices marked by their characteristics of invisibility, elusiveness, animism, persistence, and association with conventional Western haunting motifs (Hollan 2020, pp. 453–55). Hollan's interviewee, Nene'na Limbong, describes the dream involving his dead father as "a real experience" (2014). Hollan thus interprets the account as more than merely metaphorical.

In another take, Mark Fisher (2012) navigates the concept of hauntology around the subject of electronic music, noting that critics have reached out to term again to describe ghostly music produced by a confluence of musicians. Fisher (2012) defined this hauntological confluence as a cultural impasse once it was clear to him that electronic music could not deliver futuristic sounds by the year 2005. He argues instead that we always experience the future as a sort of haunting – it is a virtuality that infringes on our present and habituates expectations for cultural productions (Fisher 2012, p. 16). So, he suggests that hauntological music mourns the failure

of a given future to transpire. In line with Fisher's argument, I seek to investigate the virtuality that infringes on the *miring* and is experienced as 'haunting' for cultural production.

I thus intend to understand the Ibans through descriptions of their ancestors in their *miring* practices. Moving in the direction of different worlds and potentialities, I aim to enrich this path by delving into Ibans cosmology. Here, it is worth noting Wadley's (1999) assertion that while some Ibans may express scepticism of supernatural claims, they generally share a core set of beliefs about the supernatural with their community. While they may question and critically evaluate specific supernatural events and practices, they maintain a shared understanding of basic supernatural concepts and symbols. This shared understanding serves as the foundation for their religious practices and provides communicative value within their community (Wadley 1999, p. 596).

Wadley (1999) discusses ancestor worship and its role in societies such as the Iban of Borneo. Ancestor worship involves the belief that the deceased can influence, or be influenced by, their living descendants. Living individuals seek to influence their ancestors positively through adherence to traditional rituals and practices, effectively communicating the importance of ancestors and their traditions to their lives and kin relationships. Wadley approaches religion as the acceptance of supernatural claims, which is communicated through verbal agreement even though these claims cannot be proven empirically. Such acceptance fosters cooperation and social relationships, making religious behaviour distinct. Wadley acknowledges that beliefs may be questioned and can vary across individuals but highlights the importance of a shared understanding of core supernatural concepts for meaningful communication within a religious context.

Wadley's 1999 article focuses on ritual taboos, particularly those related to mourning practices in Iban communities. These taboos are particularly related to the communicated acceptance of claims that abstention from certain behaviours can influence the supernatural realm in ways that aren't demonstrable. Adherence to mourning taboos communicates the importance of the deceased as well as the living relations connected to them. Violation of these taboos may imply a lack of respect for both the dead and the living, as well as for the customs binding them together (Wadley 1999, pp. 595–97). Wadley emphasised how the *adat* (a system of customary law) ensures order in the world. Proper adherence to *adat* is crucial in maintaining this order especially when it comes to treatment of the dead, which includes both recently deceased individuals and distant ancestors (Wadley 1999, p. 605). The concept of hauntology resonates

with Wadley's discussion in the sense that both concepts deal with the presence of a past lingering in the present.

In Wadley's discussion, the Iban people's adherence to *adat* and mourning taboos is a way of honouring their ancestors and the customs passed down through generations. Adherence keeps the influence and memory of the ancestors alive in their daily lives. Similarly, hauntology deals with the idea that past injustices, events, or cultural elements continue to influence and shape the present even if they are not physically present. Both concepts highlight the enduring impact of historical and cultural elements on contemporary societies, whether in terms of the Iban connection to their ancestors or the haunting presence of past injustices in hauntology.

While participating in hauntology, the Ibans are also aware to some extent that this is about the social structuring of their culture and ways of life – and that is part of what is sacred aside from the ancestor worship. This is a way of maintaining a social order focused on community as it shows routine aspects of the hauntings and how 'in tune' people are with these traditions. The Iban understanding varies significantly from the previous Eurocentric discussions of haunting where haunting is an anomaly. The 'haunting' and living together with spirits are the norm. "Moreover, the souls of the newly-dead are said to join those of the long-dead (e.g. Uchibori 1984, p. 22), adding to a vaguely defined *betara* 'collective'. Some Iban claim that after a period in Sebayan, the souls of humans (*semengat*) eventually become dew that feeds the rice plants (see e.g., Jensen 1974, p. 108) that are then ingested by the living. Rice thus becomes 'a transubstantiation of the ancestors', which is reflected in the claim that 'rice is our ancestors' (*padi aki' ini' kami*) (Sather 1994a, p. 130). In addition, Sather (1993, p. 111 n. 42) reports that some Iban claim that the souls of the dead never depart the longhouse. Instead, they live in a world inverted beneath the floor (*Sebayan*). This explains why the living drop offerings to the dead through slats in the floor, and why 'give the ancestors drink' (*meri' betara ngirup*) is commonly uttered before people pour small libations of rice wine through the floor".

All my research participants reminisced about why *miring* was practised and when. *Miring* occurred on a wide range of occasions related to planting, festivals, guests, weddings, business, sickness, communication with gods, and times of disagreement. Rituals were reportedly conducted for many reasons, including following ancestral beliefs, in response to omens, to stop bad intentions entering a longhouse, to accompany an event such as the harvest festival, to ask the gods for assistance in life or healing, to demonstrate hospitality, to heal totems, to

appease the guardians of land before farming, or to seek justice from the gods during disputes or disagreements.

2.4 Exploring the sociolinguistics of the spectre

Ana Deumert's 2022 work *The sound of absent presence* claims to formulate the sociolinguistics of the spectre. The reasoning behind selecting Deumert's work is to understand more of the Iban rituals that engage with the sensuality and affective nature of social life, going beyond the boundaries of observable practice proposed by the naive empiricism that, over the decades, has shaped sociolinguistic work (Deumert 2022, p. 1). It adopts an approach in which people converse with spirits, ghosts, gods and ancestors. A sociolinguistics of the spectre pushes the boundaries of language and thought, enabling us to question our relationships with the dead, examine the identities of the living, and explore the nexus between what is thought and unthought (Davis 2005, p. 379).

Deumert (2022) then reflected on her previous training as a linguist, when she felt unsettled and uncomfortable with the focus given to language and resisted suggestions for ontological minimalism. Instead, she moved towards ontological complexities, embracing speakers as complete humans. She acknowledged that initially, her work was grounded in Western social theory, but her thinking has changed, and she now has a stronger focus on anti-colonial and anti-capitalist literature. She further indicated that she did not seek to "bring speakers back in", but to celebrate people's ability to be creative and reject all types of injustices (Deumert 2022, p. 3). She advocated for an agency that mirrors translanguaging practices but with an addition that assumes the presence of a sovereign subject: spectral thinking. Deumert (2022) thus meant to unsettle the ideas of sovereign agency and explore our complex interconnectedness with the social and material world – with past present-future, with other-than-human agency (Nyamnjoh 2017, Pennycook 2017, and Wee 2021 in Deumert 2022, p. 4).

This thinking avenue suggested by Deumert (2022) provides a platform for my investigation on the Ibans through their *miring* rituals by rethinking their relationship with other worldly beings in their way of living. Instead of adapting solely Western ideas, I aimed to use my capacity as an insider-kin researcher to understand Iban ways through their *miring* rituals.

2.4.1 The concept of spectres

Deumert (2022, p. 4) further located the potentials of a sociolinguistics of spectres and draws on Jacques Derrida's idea of the 'metaphysics of presence'. Deumert's 2018 magazine article "What about ghosts? Towards a sociolinguistics of the spectre" views Derrida's interpretation from a poststructuralist perspective: spectres are present as absences, unseen yet still present. Derrida encapsulates the intricate time aspect of spectres in his coined term of hauntology. Derrida contends that our existence in the world, our ontology, is not merely a given and immediate state. Rather, it is situated within time, shaped by what no longer exists (the past) and what is yet to come (the future). According to Deumert, comprehending the intricate temporal dimensions of social existence means understanding that every action, every speech act, exists simultaneously in the past–present–future continuum – and lies at the heart of a sociolinguistics of spectres. She further adds that spectral thinking emerges as a response to what is termed 'the crisis of the natural', presenting a viewpoint that transcends traditional empiricism and materialism. In essence, not everything significant is overtly visible, quantifiable, or reducible to data. Spectres and ghosts serve as reminders that behind the tangible sights, sounds, and sensations lie concealed narratives and voices. The concealed holds as much significance as the visible (Deumert 2018, pp. 1–3).

Deumert then introduces spectral thinking as a long tradition of paying attention to ghosts and their hauntings evidenced in the writings of Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and Walter Benjamin. She notes their work portrayed the roles of dreams, the unconscious, and historical ghosts (Deumert 2022, p. 5). But for her, spectral thinking is a common concept – one that includes thinking that ranges from ghosts, spirits, phantoms and zombies to popular worldwide culture, from folklore to cosmologies. Therefore, she argues, "talking about spectres, about that which is both absent and present, is thus not an arcane form of scholarly vanguardism; rather, it is a form of vernacular theory" (Santos 2018 in Deumert 2022b, p. 5). Deumert further sees spectral thinking in everyday life as supported by a vast semantic field. She exemplifies this with the English language, which includes the following words (and the list is not exhaustive): vision, spectre, apparition, spirit, ghost, phantom, zombie, presence, shadow, angel, spook, zeitgeist, phantom, revenant, demon, monster, poltergeist, ghost word, omen, breath, crack, crackle, echo, and visitor. These words haunt, frighten, startle, and astonish. They make one feel aghast, struck by emotions ranging from horror to amazement. People also respond to ghosts with emotion: there are ghost-lovers, ghost seerers, ghost-mongers, ghost worshippers, ghost-

raisers, and ghost hunters. Still, Deumert (2022), quotes Roger Luckhorst (2002, p. 13) saying that it is important to not get caught up in a 'generalizable economy of haunting': "ghosts require readings resonant with, and giving justice to, spatiotemporal, representational and political specificity" (p. 6). And with that, she suggests situating our spectral stories according to specific contexts.

This means working with the ideas of a sociolinguistics of the spectres allows for a paradigm shift that helps the researcher move away from their previously acquired perspectives of Western concepts of truth to acknowledge agencies beyond that of the human.

2.4.2 Moving beyond human agency: the Ibans

Deumert (2022) suggests that conversation beyond the human could offer insights into the thought and unthought. The distinction between the thought and unthought can be understood through the lens of the Iban ritual of *miring*. The 'thought' encompasses the conscious, articulated aspects of language and communication within the ritual, which include spoken words, chants, and prayers. On the other hand, the 'unthought' refers to non-verbal cues, symbolic gestures, and ritualistic actions that carry deeper cultural meanings and significance. For example, the arrangement of offerings, the manner of ritual performance, and the collective participation of the community may convey unspoken messages and beliefs that transcend explicit language. While participants may consciously articulate their intentions and desires through spoken words and chants, the deeper layers of meaning embedded within the ritual go beyond explicit language. These unthought dimensions may involve ancestral beliefs, spiritual connections, and cultural practices that shape the ritual experience and contribute to its efficacy. Understanding the interplay between thought and unthought in the sociolinguistics of the spectres allows for a comprehensive analysis of spectral communication within the context of Iban ritual.

Participants in this study included five *lemambang* (bards) and three *manang* (shamans) with demonstrated expertise in conducting the *miring* and involving the gods. Each *lemambang* or *manang* participant offered various insights into speaking beyond the human, including using voices that ward off evil spirits, have healing powers, and summon the gods through chants. Deumert (2022) notes that it is important to listen carefully if we seek to understand the spectral resonances of the social world. The participants of this study talk about the voices of ancestors, gods, spirits, and trophy heads as well as voices heard in dreams; they talk about omens,

communication with spirits, messages deciphered from animal offal, and voices from the beginning of time. This is a "polyphony of absent presence" (Deumert 2022, p. 14).

Vinson H. Sutlive describes the cosmology of the Iban, which places the Iban as the most important society with other societies revolving around them and then being drawn within the realm of Iban ways of living (1978, p. 1). In his 1978 book *The Iban of Sarawak*, Sutlive describes the mobility of the Ibans within the landscape of Sarawak based on empirical research he conducted in Sibu between 1969 and 1972. He emphasised how the world of the Iban reflected societal norms and cultural mobility, noting that the Ibans present themselves as the centre of the universe while each Iban longhouse operates in its own microcosmic system guided by its sun, moon, and stars (Sutlive 1978, p. 1). He then demonstrates how elaborate beliefs and rituals bound individual Ibans together into a healthy community, including how the individual Iban adapted to new circumstances of Westernisation.

Peter Varney (2014) characterised the Ibans as one of the most spiritually inclined communities in the world. He notes their view of the universe as encompassing two interconnected realms: *mensia* (representing humans) and *antu* and *petara* (representing spirits). The two realms regularly interact through various means, such as *piring* (ritual offerings and sacrifices), *mimpi* (dreams), and *burong* (interpretation of bird behaviour for omens). Varney also mentions that the Iban used to practise headhunting, with the belief that the severed heads retained the spirits of the deceased individuals. The Iban believed in a cooperative relationship with the spirit world where spirits were willing to help humans, but also feared the consequences of ignoring signs. To maintain harmony, they made offerings of chickens or pigs, conducted *piring* ceremonies for guidance, and rectified disruptions with substantial pig sacrifices, rather than death penalties, as failing to do so could lead to catastrophic events for the community (Varney 2014, pp. 2–3).

In *Tears of sorrow, words of hope*, Sutlive (2012) suggests that Iban culture revolves around three main themes: interpersonal connection, reverence, and mutual give and take. These principles shape the conduct of the Iban people and are prominently showcased in their traditional chants. The fundamental human desire for inclusion is profoundly evident within the Iban community. Whether in life or death, it is the ancestor who plays the role of welcoming the departed into fresh connections and associations (Sutlive 2012, pp. 23–24). Sutlive recorded how from birth until death, each Iban is a part of nurturing, sustaining, and expansive network of kin, friends, and worlds both seen and unseen. As in life, so in death: no Iban dies alone.

This is exemplified in how even for a lorry driver or lone hunter who perishes by accident, there is every assurance that ancestral beings will accompany them to their new community. Those who die other-than-natural deaths are assigned to domains appropriate to their demise, but even they are afforded funeral rites, and their souls are accompanied by a soul guide to their eventual residence. In Iban beliefs, networks of kin and friends do not end in death but extend into *Sebayan* (the Land of the Dead) (Sutlive 2012, p. 24). In this manner, the Iban conception of interconnectedness remains uninterrupted, bridging the realms of the living and the deceased (Sutlive 2012, p. 25).

Supporting Sutlive's studies, Reed Wadley's work *Disrespecting the dead and the living: Iban* observes the Iban way of worship, which recognises verbal agreements in terms of an agreed-on religious way of practice. The assertion that Iban beliefs encompass the supernatural is true. Even though such claims cannot be empirically shown as accurate, it is common for people to suspend their scepticism about supernatural claims and communicate non-sceptically with each other (Wadley 1999, pp. 595–96). Wadley states that the focus of traditional Iban religion on ancestor worship and maintenance of cosmic order through ritual maintains social balance and avoids the bad luck perceived as caused by the supernatural realm (1999, pp. 595–96). He suggests that rich associations can be drawn from the context of Iban relations with the supernatural, their environments, and the 'power' dynamics in ritual organisation. The Ibans accept this religious way of worship as part of their culture and identity. Wadley also suggests that, following the perspective above, religious behaviour involves accepting supernatural claims through verbal agreement, even when these claims cannot be empirically verified. This non-sceptical acceptance of supernatural beliefs fosters cooperation among individuals within the religious community. It acknowledges that relying solely on internal beliefs as a motivating factor or religious behaviour can be problematic, and that scholars should instead focus on people's claims of belief and their corresponding actions (Wadley 1999b, p. 596).

At this juncture, I restate Deumert's admission that her earlier works had ignored the trans-human agency (2021, p. 2). In response to this trans-human agency omission, my own investigation seeks to elucidate the Iban way of living by integrating its spiritual pantheon through their *miring* practices. Through dwelling in longhouses, the Ibans demonstrate their way of life, their interactions, and their relationship to the spiritual realms. As Barret (1993, p. 225) notes, "within the reality of the *pelian*, the *manang* [shaman] brings into relief the major

categories of being within the Iban cosmos – the living, the spirits, the dead and gods – and their various habitats".

The voices reported by the interviewees are thus heard beyond the boundaries of conventional academic thought. They are nonetheless heard.

2.5 The global Indigenous context

In a study of an Indigenous Nordic community, the Sami people, Alkas and Salmi (2015) investigate the *sieidi* or sacrificial places of this society. The Sami people are scattered around Northern Finland, Sweden, Norway, and the Kola Peninsula in Russia. They subsist by hunting, gathering, and reindeer herding (Alkas and Salmi 2015, p. 90). The Sami believe that the natural world, such as stones, animals and plants, communicates with them daily. Their *siedi* sites typically comprise boulders and stone formations; the Sami bring meat, animals, and metal objects as offerings in exchange for good fortune, such as a fruitful hunting trip (Alkas and Salmi 2015, p. 90).

The meaning of these sites in Northern Finland changed over time with the coming of Christianity and colonialism from the south. Part of the Kingdom of Sweden in the Middle Ages, Finland was absorbed into the Russian empire in1809 as Sweden lost power (Alkas and Salmi 2015, p. 91). During its time under Swedish and Russian rule, political and economic development was concentrated in the south. This created division from the north. The link between the Sami people and the Swedes is often described as colonial. The Swedish crown made claims to Sami lands, which affected the Sami *siedi*. Colonial expansion and Christian culture brought attitudes that viewed the *siedis* as paganistic and unscientific.

In contrast to the Sami reliance on hunting, gathering, and reindeer herding, the Ibans sustain themselves primarily through rice planting – a practice deeply ingrained in their cultural and agricultural traditions. Cultivation of rice is a vital means of subsistence for the Ibans, providing sustenance for their communities and facilitating their socio-economic livelihoods. Similar to the Sami connection with nature and their sacrificial offerings at *siedi* sites, Iban rice planting rituals implicate a profound reverence for the natural world. Just as the Sami believe in ongoing communication with the natural environment, the Ibans view their *miring* during rice planting as communication with the spiritual. The Sami people rely on animal sacrifice and offerings at *siedi* sites as a means of communication with the spiritual realm. Both the

Ibans and the Sami engage in practices deeply rooted in their respective cultural traditions, each of which reflects the intimacy of their relationship with the environment and their spiritual beliefs.

In the 1980 work *Central Eskimo songs*, Eckett and Newmark study seventeen songs collected by Knud Rasmussen, a Danish explorer and native Inuit speaker, between 1929 and 1932. The native Iglulik, Caribou, and Netsilik groups of Inuit communities subsist by hunting, fishing, and building kayaks. Their ritual practice of song duels aims to improve interpersonal conflicts in the community. Duel singing is also a cathartic means of releasing pressure because, in the Inuit cultural context, people were not allowed to air grievances publicly (Eckett and Newmark 1980, p. 191). The researchers found that the Inuit use rituals of singing duels to resolve conflicts and maintain stable interpersonal relationships. A song event establishes this by encouraging reconciliation within a ritual setting central to their community.

Song duels are also juridical instruments that serve to settle disputes with the aim of restoring healthy relationships between members of the community (Hoebel 1954, Spencer 1959, and Foulks 1972 in Eckert and Newmark 1980, pp. 191–92). But between 1930 and the 1960s, Christian missionaries became more influential in the lives of the Netsilik Inuit and their song duel ritual practice decreased. Acculturation policies enforced by the Canadian government further saw Inuit migration become settled, and they started taking up paid labour and accepting government aid. Religious and government intervention thus resulted in many changes in the lives of the Inuit (Asen 1989). Much like the Inuit, the Ibans of Sarawak engage in a practice known as *kelam ai* or trial by water. While the specifics of these rituals may differ, both serve as cathartic means of releasing pressure and resolving disputes within their respective communities. Much as the Inuit ritual of a singing duel aimed to foster reconciliation and maintain stable interpersonal relationships, so, too, does *kelam ai* among the Ibans.

In the Far East, Hiroshi Utagawa and Jorgen Podemann Sorensen observed the Ainu of Hokkaido who used to keep bear cubs for their bear Iomante, or ‘sending back’ rituals. The Ainus believed in a myth about a bear god who fell into the hands of humans and participated in bear festivals (Utagawa 1992, pp. 255–56; Sorensen 2012, pp. 79–80). The act of ‘sending back’ resulted in the bears being killed. For the Ainus, young bears acted as a mediator with the gods, negotiating for various exchanges between the spiritual world and the reality of the

Ainus. The Ainu people themselves are considered a dying Indigenous group owing to the nineteenth-century assimilation policies of the Japanese government. Between 1871 and 1876, the government forced the Ainu to become Japanese citizens, and they were forced to speak only Japanese. Their hunting and fishing lifestyles were banned, and their ancestral lands taken away.

Parallels between the Ainu people of Hokkaido and the spiritual pantheon of the Ibans reveals striking similarities in their rituals and beliefs. Just as the Ainu kept bear cubs for their bear Iomante rituals, the Ibans revere a diverse spiritual pantheon that includes gods and ancestral spirits who play crucial roles in their *miring* ceremonies. The Ainu myth of a bear god who participated in bear festivals mirrors the Iban belief in powerful spiritual entities that mediate the human and spiritual worlds. In both cultures, these rituals serve as a means of communication and negotiation with the divine, with offerings and sacrifices made to ensure blessings and prosperity for the community.

Other studies conducted on societies in various parts of the world also show some similarity to the Iban people. Specifically, they share an understanding of ritual as an activity that brings them together alongside the importance of ritual hierarchy in fostering a collective community. For the Ibans, *miring* serves to elevate the *lemambang* and establish their authority in tribal interactions. Existing literature supports the idea that rituals generate a collective emotional experience using practices and symbols (Hoffman 2012, p. 3). Research on other communities further indicates that rituals contribute to the formation of memories and narratives (see Durkheim 1912; Hoffman 2012, p. 3; Turner 1969; Tambiah 1979; Rappaport 1999; Swenson, 1999; McCauley and Lawson 2002; Nelson 2005; Seligman et al. 1999). By referencing other rituals, it is implied that my study will address the gap in understanding the impact of various changes in the developing world on *miring* practices.

Chapter summary

In summary, this chapter provides a robust theoretical foundation for understanding the sociolinguistics of spectres, setting the stage for a detailed exploration of Iban *miring* practices in the subsequent chapter. Ana Deumert's (2022) exploration of the sociolinguistics of spectres is especially pertinent to this discussion. Deumert challenges conventional sociolinguistic methodologies by advocating for an approach that includes voices and presences beyond the

human. Her concept of spectral thinking, which emphasises the importance of the unseen and unquantifiable aspects of human experience, aligns closely with the Iban practices of *miring*. Deumert's work underscores the need to listen to and engage with these spectral presences to fully understand the sociolinguistic landscape.

As I move into Chapter 3, the focus will transition to a literature review on the Iban *miring* rituals. This chapter will explore existing scholarly works that detail the practices, significance, and cultural context of *miring*. By examining these rituals through the lens of Deumert's (2018, 2022) sociolinguistics of the spectres, I will explore how the Iban engage with their spiritual pantheon and maintain social harmony.

Chapter Three: sociolinguistics of the spectres and the Iban ritual

"*Miring is the foundation of everything that an Iban does,"* Daud

3.0 Introduction: *The miring ritual and the Ibans*

Benedict Sandin, a prominent anthropologist and expert on Iban culture, described the Iban religion in his 1957 book *The Iban and their religion*. The work highlights the complex and syncretic nature of Iban religion, which incorporates elements of animism, ancestor worship, and Hindu-Buddhist beliefs. Sandin (1957) argues that the Iban religious system is characterised by a belief in a multiplicity of spirits, both good and bad, that inhabit the natural world and influence human affairs. He holds that the Iban view of the spiritual realm is closely connected to their social and economic systems and that they use religious practices and rituals to maintain social harmony and ensure success in hunting, farming, and other activities (in Jensen, 1974) Sandin also asserts the importance of the *tuai burong* (bird chief), in the Iban religion. The *tuai burong* is a community leader responsible for communicating with spirits and overseeing important religious rituals and ceremonies. Sandin suggests that the *tuai burong* plays a key part in the maintenance of the spiritual and social balance of the community.

Another version of the Iban and their rituals is provided by Vinson and Joanna Sutlive (2001) in the four-volume set of *The encyclopaedia of Iban studies*, where they describe the Iban religion as "exceedingly complex, beautiful and full of exciting imagery and concepts" (p. 772). They contend that the Iban religion permeated all facets of a traditional Iban society, and even using the term 'religion' distorted the Iban worldview. According to them, the concept of 'religion' is a construct of English speakers that should be held in contrast with economic or other cultural categories such as headhunting. For the Ibans, there are no distinct boundaries between these practices and what might be labelled as religion.

Moreover, Varney (2014) recounts how the Iban believe that after death, each person has a designated place in *sebayan*, the realm of the deceased, which is determined by factors that included how they died. According to some accounts, *sebayan* has different phases. The final phase, *mandai jenoh*, is often called 'the quiet place' and associated with tranquillity or contentment. In this state, the spirits of the deceased, referred to as *antu sebayan*, can eventually merge with the symbolic "mists of the morning"; they could then complete their cycle by becoming part of a growing rice crop and eventually become consumed by living members of

the *bilik* family (Varney 2014, p. 6). Religious actions and beliefs are intricately woven into every aspect of the Iban way of living and for external observes, this poses a challenge to separating domains – not simply in the case of religious actions and beliefs, but also in areas such as land tenure, land usage, and the extent of a village's legal identity. Therefore, Sutlive and Sutlive (2001) identify a gap between understanding Iban culture and the dimensions of its rituals that needs to be addressed (2001, pp. 772–73).

They further observe the absence of a comprehensive examination of Iban beliefs and ritual practices in their respective contexts. They reviewed Jensen's 1974 work as the sole monograph dedicated to the Iban religion. Davidson and Sutlive (1991) point out that Jensen's monograph did not cover important aspects of the traditional Iban way of life, such as headhunting, and omitted discussion of various *gawai* performances. However, they acknowledged how Masing's 1981 dissertation translated the ritual text of the *timang gawai amat* (harvest ritual chant). This provided a platform for discussion of religious themes and concepts, shedding light on Iban religious practices (Sutlive and Sutlive 2001b, p. 773).

Despite the rich documentation, there remains a gap in comprehensive studies of Iban rituals, as noted by Sutlive and Sutlive (2001). They critique the lack of detailed examination in previous works, emphasising the need for a deeper understanding of the Iban religious practices and their socio-cultural contexts. This chapter underscores the intricate connection between Iban spiritual beliefs and their everyday practices, highlighting the role of rituals like *miring* in sustaining the community's spiritual and social equilibrium

The next section will seek into the significance of *mimpi* (dreams) within Iban culture, exploring how dreams serve as a medium for spiritual communication and guidance. Dreams are not merely subconscious experiences for the Ibans; they are a vital part of their spiritual framework, influencing decisions and actions in their daily lives. This exploration will further illustrate the profound connection between the Iban people and their spiritual beliefs, demonstrating how dreams facilitate interaction with the spiritual realm.

3.1 *Mimpi* (dreams)

I'Anson & Jasper (2017) discussed how dreams are viewed differently in Islamic tradition compared to Western perspectives. "*This is because the topic of dreams tends to be overlooked in Western accounts, since such phenomena are viewed as ambivalent. And secondly, given*

their exclusion from consideration, the potential work that dreams do within a tradition where they are taken seriously is likely to be missed," (I'Anson & Jasper. 2017, p.120). During the Arab Spring in 2011, dreams were taken seriously by many protests in Egypt, showing how they can impact social and political movements. I'Anson & Jasper (2017) also mentioned different types of dreams in Islam, like those that come from the dreamer themselves, those influenced by supernatural beings, and those that offer prophetic insight. This contrasts with Western ideas where dreams are usually seen as individual experiences. I'Anson & Jasper (2017) also touches on how taking dreams seriously challenges Western assumptions about individualism and control. Dreams raise questions about how much control we really have over our own lives and challenge the idea of a unified self. This has implications for ethics and how we understand ourselves in relation to others.

For the Ibans, dreams are more than visual experiences in a state of sleep. Rather, they are a principal medium through which the dead communicate with the living (Sutlive 1991, p. 9). In the second volume of *The encyclopaedia of Iban studies*, Vinson and Joanne Sutlive (2001) note that *mimpi* (dreams) are very significant and play a crucial role in the livelihood of the Ibans. The Ibans view *mimpi* as a medium through which Iban gods and spirits can convey their messages to humans. *Mimpi* are also considered the most reliable means for human interaction with the spiritual realm.

In Iban mythology, Iban hero Menggin was thought to be the first to emphasise the importance of dreams to the Ibans. Dreams are regarded as spiritual blessings, moments of contact that provide guidance for achieving success or averting calamity. Before an important war, Iban leaders would customarily encourage warriors to sleep early and pay special attention to their dreams. If a number of Iban warriors experienced *mimpi rawan* (anxiety dreams), the conflict would be postponed or warriors excused from involvement (Sather 1994, p. 171 in Sutlive and Sutlive 2001, p. 1128).

Mimpi also preceded an Iban individual in becoming a *manang* (shaman). Moreover, Sutlive and Sutlive (2001) noted a significant number of Iban healers, the *manang,* practising their craft – and in many instances, the decision to do so was not entirely by choice. In 1995, the *Aum Bala Manang* (a shaman workshop) found that 26 out of 38 male *manang* participants would not have opted to become *manang* if given the choice. Typically, becoming a *manang* involves an experience in which the prospective healer interacts with a spirit who becomes the healer's guiding force. The personal calling is shared with the family of the *manang* candidate

and once their support is ensured, the *manang* candidate begins training under the guidance of more experienced and older *manang*. This training involves acquiring sleight of hand techniques, the ability to manipulate objects and, most importantly, the dramatic enactment of *pelian* (healing chant). The performance of the *pelian* involves a state of trans-induction during which the *manang* is instructed by their familiar spirit. In this state, wherein the *manang*'s soul is detached from their body, they are able to communicate with the soul of their patient (Sutlive and Sutlive 2001, pp. 1036–37).

Sather (2001) corroborates this record with his findings of the same 1995 *Aum Bala Manang*, but with a focus on its participants: *Manang* Jabing, *Manang* Digat, and *Manang* Bangga (the latter two of which had begun practising in their mid-20s). He recounts how potential *manang* novices received their first 'dream visit' in their mid-30s to 40s; in the case of the participants who attended the shaman workshop, the average age at which they experienced their first shamanic dream was 42 years. For example, *Manang* Jabing, born at the Babu longhouse on the Babu tributary of Rimbas, experienced his first series of dreams in his 40s. This was after he had married and gone to live with his wife's family at Nanga Gayau, when he was already a performing *lemambang*. According to Sather (2001), *Manang* Jabing underwent a ritual installation and became a practising *manang* (p. 23).

Sather (2001) recounted *Manang* Jabing describing a dream, wherein a spirit presented Jabing with an ultimatum, as follows: "Then this 'person' (*orang*) in my dreams gave me an ultimatum. 'If you don't do it, you will go mad, you will die of madness, if you don't become a shaman'. Then, yes what could I do? That is why I do this work. I was in my heart, [at first] reluctant" (p. 24b).

This dream involves communication from a spectral figure who presents the dreamer with an ultimatum. Such communication from the spectral realm is significant as it impels the dreamer to make a life-altering decision. Receiving a message or guidance from the spirit world through a dream is a common theme in spectral communication. In this case, the dreamer faced a dilemma: whether to heed the message from the spectral figure and become a shaman or resist it.

The dreamer's decision to become a shaman was thus influenced by the threat of going 'mad' or dying from madness if he did not comply with the spectral ultimatum. This cultural and social pressure, conveyed through the dream, underscores the sociolinguistic dynamics at play.

It reflects how societal beliefs, expectations, and norms shape individual responses to spectral communication. A few of my participants mentioned dreams in their narrative. One is Belayong (see the immediate Excerpt 3.1), the youngest *lemambang* in my study, and another is Lambat who calls himself a cursed *lemambang,* (see Chapter 7.1).

Excerpt 3.1: Belayong – description of dreams of his grandfather

> In the beginning of my dream of my grandfather, he was asking for food. Therefore, we performed the *miring* for him. The second time I received him in a dream, he had asked me to become a *manang* (shaman). When I refused to accept the offer, not long after, I fell ill. I underwent two operations/ surgeries in 2014. In the same year, while unconscious, I received another dream. The feeling was very real, as if I was meeting him face to face. When I recovered from the operations, I decided to learn. (about shamanism).

In Excerpt 3.1 above, Belayong's perspective on spectral communication resonates with the insights presented by Sather (2001) and Sutlive & Sutlive (2001) regarding the significance of dreams and spiritual interactions within the Iban community. Belayong recounts how his grandfather communicated with him through dreams. This recollection reveals an interesting perspective on spectral communication and its impact on sociolinguistic practices among the Ibans. Spectral communication refers to interactions or messages received from the spirit world, often in dreams or altered states of consciousness. Spectral communication is deeply intertwined with traditional Iban beliefs and spirituality. Belayong's dream of his grandfather shows how such communications can shape one's life. His grandfather initially requested food in the dream, which led to the performance of *miring,* a traditional ritual. This highlights the sociolinguistic aspect of spectral communication, where linguistic expressions (requests for food) are part of the interaction between the living and the spirit world. This also parallels Sutlive & Sutlive's (2001) documentation of how dreams play a crucial role in conveying messages from the spiritual realm to humans.

Belayong's dream takes a significant turn when his grandfather asks him to become a *manang,* a shaman or healer. Refusal of this offer results in illness and subsequent surgeries. The refusal and subsequent decision to learn about shamanism suggest that Belayong is navigating a complex interplay between traditional beliefs and contemporary identity. After his illness and experiences with spectral communication, Belayong decides to learn about shamanism. These

narrative echoes Sather's observation of how dreams can influence individuals' decisions and actions, leading to shifts in perspective and acquisition of specialised knowledge.

The concept of spectral communication is significant in the sociocultural context of the Ibans. It reflects their continued engagement with traditional beliefs alongside the influences of modernity and contemporary practices. Belayong's experiences exemplify how spectral communication can lead individuals to re-evaluate their roles and identities within the community.

3.2 Animal signs and the interpretations of animal offal

For the Ibans, the behaviour and presence of animals are seen as significant omens that can influence daily life and important events. Birds, snakes, and other creatures are observed closely, their actions interpreted as messages from the spiritual realm. Similarly, animal offals are examined during rituals to predict outcomes and seek guidance from the spirits. These practices highlight the Iban's profound connection with their environment and the spiritual significance they attribute to the animal kingdom. Within this context, Sutlive (1978) described specific acts performed to ensure the success of a *Gawai*. Sutlive (1978) described rituals carried out to ensure the success of the new year's *Gawai*. Firstly, guests are instructed to ignore any unfavourable omens, such as sightings of birds, snakes, or other signs, encountered on their way. An offering will be made to appease the spirit associated with the omen. Secondly, one of the hosts holds a chicken by its leg and breast, waving it over the heads of the guests while pronouncing a blessing. After the chicken is slaughtered, a feather dipped in its blood is used to touch each person's forehead, symbolising protection, community, and a shared participation in the death of the old year, especially if the previous harvest was poor (Sutlive, 1978, p.67).

In contrast, Clare Boulanger (2008) discusses the influence of Christian missionaries on Iban beliefs, highlighting a shift from traditional practices. She recounts an interview where an Iban participant, despite being an Anglican convert, made the sign of the cross upon hearing a bird call—an indication of the lingering influence of traditional omens. Boulanger notes that missionaries aimed to discredit traditional practices to create a clear separation between the past and present, emphasising Christian concepts such as forgiveness over generational consequences for breaking taboos, (Boulanger 2008, p. 236).

The juxtaposition of these two perspectives—traditional Iban practices involving animal signs and omens, and the influence of Christian missionaries on Iban beliefs—reveals the complex interplay between indigenous spirituality and external religious influences. The Iban's deep-seated connection with their environment is evident in their interpretation of animal behaviour and ritualistic use of animal offal to communicate with the spiritual realm. This practice is a testament to their belief in the interconnectedness of all living things and the spiritual messages conveyed through nature.

3.3 Calling to the spirits

Freeman (2004) observed a deeply rooted Iban belief that their rice fields are imbued with a spirituality that possesses a distinct soul and personality (p. 153). The *padi* spirits are looked upon as having a society of their own; the Ibans behave towards and address them as though they were real persons. Freeman (2004) recounts an Iban conducting the spirits back to the longhouse, saying, “Oh you padi spirits, harken now to my call! Be you fishing, or hunting, or setting your traps; I bid you return, I beckon, I summon you all: All boys, all girls, all fathers, all mothers, All grandsires, all grandmas, All kith and kin-of family and of tribe” (p. 153). The spirits are led by a trail of puffed rice scattered for them to follow, then welcomed with ceremonies the Iban reserve for their most distinguished guests (Freeman 2004, p. 156).

Proponents of spectral communication, like Deumert (2022), advocate for a broader recognition of communication forms that extend beyond human interaction (p. 1). This perspective encourages individuals to critically examine their connections with both spiritual entities and deceased individuals, highlighting the Iban practice of treating *padi* spirits as active participants in their community. This approach underscores the importance of understanding how the Iban beliefs shape interactions with the spiritual realm and deceased ancestors,

promoting a more inclusive view of communication that encompasses the living, the dead, and the supernatural.

Excerpt 3.2: Tajek – description of the *miring* for paddy planting

> Just the old ways, old tradition. I had followed the belief of our ancestors and that is the *miring*. In the old ways, when it was planting time, we performed the *miring*. When we harvest, we do the *miring*. We begin doing anything with the *miring* first… If we perform the *miring* for paddy planting, we offer our '*piring*' or food offerings to the God Sempulang Gana. We asked Sempulang Gana to give his favours to our harvest, our health as we labour in our paddy fields and we also seek for his protection so that the animals would not destroy our paddy.

Notably, the Ibans have a longstanding tradition of engaging with the spirits associated with their rice fields to enhance the prospects of a successful harvest. In one interview, a participant named Tajek describes a deep-rooted adherence to traditional Iban beliefs and practices particularly in the context of spectral communication and spectral thinking (see Excerpt 3.1 above). Her emphasis on 'the old ways' and 'old tradition' underscores a commitment to ancestral customs, suggesting the continuity of her heritage and a strong connection to the past. The mention of *miring* as a central ritual in various agricultural activities highlights its pivotal role in the Iban's agricultural practices.

Spectral communication is evident in Tajek's description of invoking the deity Sempulang Gana during the *miring* ritual. By making food offerings (*piring*) to Sempulang Gana, she seeks to establish a direct line of communication with this spiritual entity whom she beseeches for blessings, favour, and protection. This ritualistic act represents a belief in the ability to communicate with supernatural beings and enlist their assistance with agriculture. The mention of seeking Sempulang Gana's protection from potential threats such as animals further underscores the concept of spectral thinking. Belief that spiritual entities can intervene in and influence earthly affairs reflects a worldview wherein the boundary between the material and spiritual realms is permeable. In this framework, spectral thinking informs the community's understanding of cause and effect, attributing natural phenomena and outcomes to the actions and influences of spiritual beings.

The Ibans incorporate communication with spiritual entities into their daily life. This practice is well documented in early accounts such as that of Freeman (2004), who noted constant concern for avoiding actions that might displease the rice spirits. When rice grains are inadvertently spilled while being retrieved from storage bins, for instance, it is customary to recover all the spilled grains while uttering words of apology. But should rice grains fall

beneath the longhouse, retrieval often proves impractical. In such instances, a specialised ritual is enacted to rectify the mishap. The ritual entails casting a piece of firewood, signifying a ladder, beneath the longhouse. This is followed by pouring water from a gourd, which represents the rails of the ladder. While waving a cockerel in a propitiatory gesture, an officiant calls on the spirits associated with the fallen grains (Freeman 2004, p. 155).

The Ibans thus display a profound reverence towards spiritual entities, signifying their readiness to invoke these spirits when the circumstances warrant doing so. Several participants in my research described their capacity to communicate with and summon these spirits, as evidenced in the interview excerpt provided below.

Excerpt 3.3: Belayong– on summoning Dayang Jawai

> For example, you will call for the mat, because you need to spread the mat before you set up your food offerings. For example: I summon you, *Kumang* (Lady) Dayang Jawai, so we may sit next to one another, …she's the spirit of the above-mentioned mat. Then you can sit and face the food offerings.

Belayong is calling for the spirit of the mat, Dayang Jawai, in preparation for the *miring*. He asserts that it was necessary to first invite Dayang Jawai before the ritual participants sit on the mat facing the food offering as a prelude to the ceremony itself. Belayong displays his knowledge of an important spirit/deity by ensuring smooth sailing for the *miring*.

This excerpt provides valuable insight into the role of spectral communication in interactions and the exchange of messages with spirits or supernatural entities, which often occurs in ritualistic contexts. In Iban culture, language serves as a crucial tool for communicating with spirits. Belayong mentions the practice of summoning spirits, such as Kumang Dayang Jawai, through verbal invocation. The sociolinguistic aspect here is not only about communicating with spirits, but also about following prescribed linguistic norms within the community. These norms are essential for maintaining the integrity of the ritual.

Spectral communication thus serves as a bridge between the spiritual and linguistic realms. It showcases how language plays a pivotal, mediating role between the living and the spirit world. The ability to communicate with spirits is dependent on one's competence within the context of *miring* rituals. Belayong's interview excerpt highlights the interplay between spectral communication and sociolinguistic practices within the Iban community. Continuing from the

discussion of the significance of calling to the spirits in the Iban way of living, the next section examines the Iban spiritual pantheon.

3.4 The Iban spiritual pantheon

Reed Wadley (1999) mentions that most Iban spiritual researchers characterise the term *betara* or *petara* (gods) as supernatural entities with kind intentions toward human beings (Jensen 1974; Masing 1997, p. 18; and Sather 1994, p. 19). However, Wadley notes that Sather (1994) saw these *petara* as ancestors with cosmic attributes and opines that Sather's terms better capture the essence of a *petara*. The Ibans refer to the departed as *antu* (ghosts); this is a broad term that might also encompass malevolent spirits, or *antu sebayan* (ghosts of the otherworld) (Wadley 1999, p. 599). Sather (2001) reasserts that the *petara* are supernatural beings with human-like physical and physiological traits. Akin to humans, they live in longhouses, farm, and take part in warfare. Yet, unlike humans, they have supernatural abilities that allow them to perform miraculous acts and transform into different forms, (Sather (2001, p. 97).

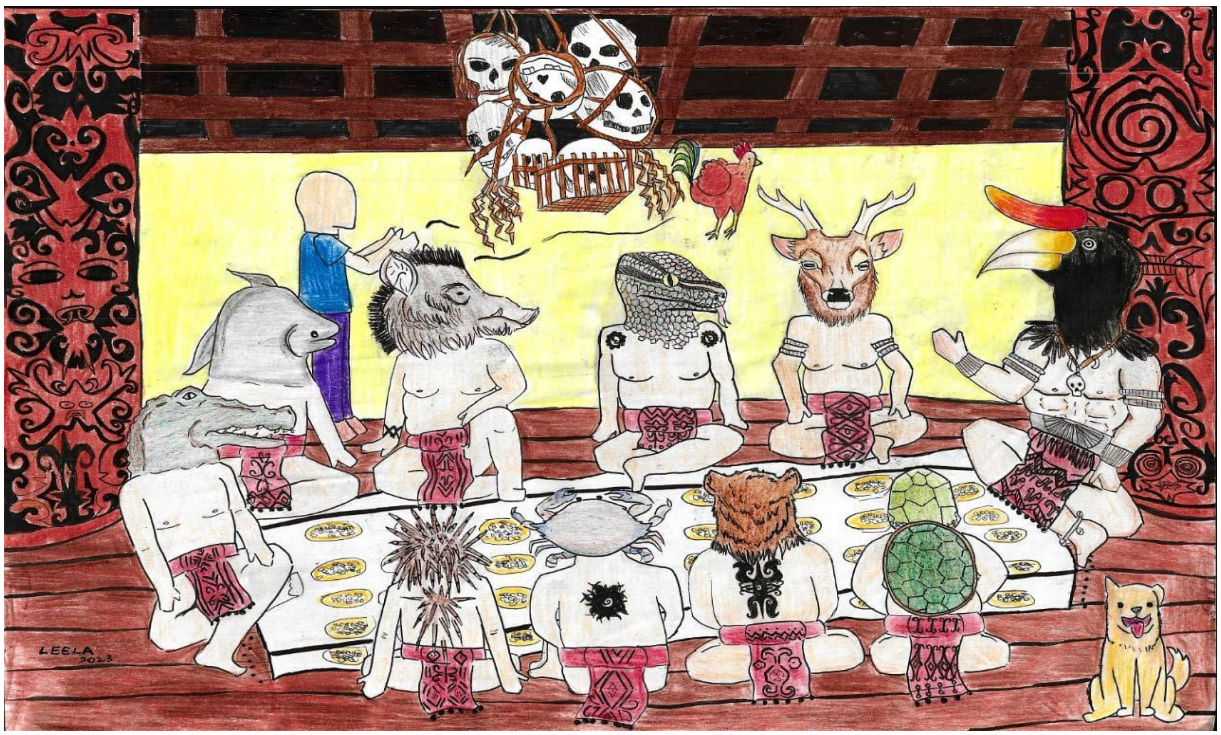

Figure 3.1: Illustration based on Ensiring (2014, pp. 44–45). Submitted by me to the Images of Research festival, University of Stirling

An Iban scholar, Ensiring (2014), narrates the travels of Bunsu Manuk , who interceded on behalf of an Iban priest as it travelled to supernatural realms by first descending into the waters to invite aquatic spirits, such as *Raja Jagu* (Spirit of the Crocodile), *Bunsu Betutu Raja Runtu* (Spirit of the Fish), *Bunsu Tekuyung*, (Spirit of the Snail), and *Bunsu Gerama* (Spirit of the Crab); next, it stopped at various territories inhabited by *Bunsu Ular* (Spirit of the Snake) (Ensiring 2014, pp. 44–45). Then, Bunsu Manuk visited the *petara* (gods) to extend invitations to Biku Bunsu Petara (God of Nature), *Bunsu Semerugah* (God of Earth), *Bunsu Selempandai* (Maker of Humans), and Sempulang Gana (God of Agriculture) (Ensiring 2014, pp.45–46.)

Ensiring continues to show that the acceptance of the spirits and gods was influenced by Bunsu Manuk's ability to persuade them; the invited spirits and gods then brought charms and talismans to aid human celebrants. Spirits and gods who were unable to grace the ritual would deliver their gifts through fellow spirits and gods (Ensiring 2014, p. 47). The mention of spirits and gods delivering gifts through others highlights the social dynamics within the spiritual realm, suggesting a network of communication and exchange among supernatural beings when communicating with living beings.

Clifford Sather (2016) describes a *Saribas Iban Sugi Sakit* or healing ritual involving a narrative about the adventures and romantic engagements of an Iban hero named Bujang Sugi (p. 251). Sather investigated the language used by the Iban *lemambang* (priest bard) and how the latter had recast the Sugi epic from one of entertainment to serve as an important instrument of a healing ritual. He begins by explaining the work of ritual specialists, most notably the *lemambang* (priest bards), *manang* (shaman), and *tukang sabak* (soul guides) (Sather 2001, pp. 5–13). Most priest bards and shaman were men, while virtually all the soul guides were women. Out of all these specialists, the principal healers were the shaman (Sather 2001). Gundi, an Iban researcher at the Tun Jugah Foundation (for the preservation and promotion of Iban culture) who worked closely with Sather, sees the *Sugi Sakit* ritual as a form of therapy proven to be an effective last resort (beyond the capabilities of a shaman). However, the ritual is also a dangerous affair because it requires *dua pengambi, idup tauka mati* (a matter of life and death and direct intervention from the gods) (Jantan Umbat 2018, p. 58). Gundi details six sources of the healing powers of the *Sugi Sakit* ritual: belief in the power of the gods; belief in the supernatural power of *Wat bujang Sugi* (the protagonist of the chant); belief in the power of the chants; support from family members and guests at the ritual; the effectiveness of traditional charms; and faith in the abilities of the *lemambang* (Jantan Umbat 2018, pp. 59–62).

In his work, Sather (2016) also describes the descent of the Shaman Gods whose entourage gained additional followers while travelling by way of various mountaintops (p. 261). The additional celestial followers included shamans and the ancestral spirits of once living *manang* (shaman) (Sather 2012 in Sather 2016, p. 261). Both spirit companions assist the human shaman in their own soul journeys. As these spirits arrived at the longhouse, the human celebrant would command them to treat the sick person with their medicines and, in doing so, effectively access the healing power of the shamans by calling on their spirit companions to intervene directly (Sather 2016, p. 261). Sather highlights how the Ibans considered performances such as *Sugi Sakit* as *pengawa*' (work) or any purposeful activity that must be done; farming, too, is considered *pengawa* (see Richards 1981, p. 96; Sather 1992, p. 108 in Sather 2016, p. 254). In his view, the Iban performance of the *Sugi Sakit* was thus an instance of work. Moreover, it was the sort of work that fell under the special province of the priest bards (although other participants, including sponsors and a lay audience, were essential to its enactment).

Penelope Graham (1984) explored the language of ritual in Iban shamanism, detailing the ritual language used by the shaman when communicating with the patients he intended to heal. Graham (1984) describes the Iban priest as the one who 'exercises power' over the pursuit of the soul of a pregnant woman and, to an extent, over the patient's family. The priest is a master of the ritual language and chants he uses (Graham 1984, p. 27). These priestly acts support earlier notions of ritual as an enabler of transformation in social status by revealing the hierarchy of power in a priest–patient relationship.

Excerpt 3.4: Belayong – an opinion on prayers

> Many people just use their prayers, but it would not work. At least from what I have seen. At last, they will come back to the *miring* for appeasing these land guardians. If you plan to cultivate a land, and the land has a guardian, for example if you plan to cultivate palm oils and the land has no guardian, then it is okay, You would not suffer from bad consequences. But if the land has a guardian, or 'owner', you have to have the *miring* ceremony for it.

A snippet from my interview data revealed that Belayong was pessimistic with the outcome of 'prayers' and insisted that *miring* was the only way to appease land guardians. He affirmed his conviction from his own experiences. He recounted how after all their efforts at 'prayer' had failed, those who encountered problems cultivating their lands would always end up seeking his help to perform a *miring* ceremony. Then, he demonstrated a short chant to appease the

land guardians and noted the need to offer food in exchange for forgiveness and permission to cultivate the land. He was firmly convinced that the chant would be able to appease the land spirits, and the landowner would be able to continue cultivating their lands without any interference. The strength of this conviction depicts the firmness of the relationship between Belayong and the spiritual world.

This excerpt from Belayong's interview sheds light on the concept of spectral communication within the context of land cultivation and appeasement of land guardians in the Iban community. It discusses the practice of communicating with land guardians or spirits when planning to cultivate specific plots of land, such as a palm oil plantation. This communication is vital for acquiring permission and blessings, or appeasing the spirits believed to inhabit the land. Belayong's interview thus illustrates how spectral communication, particularly in the context of land cultivation and appeasing land guardians, and language and ritual play a pivotal role in establishing connections with the spirit world, reflecting the spiritual values of the Ibans.

3.5 *Gawai Dayak* (harvest festival)

In the context of the Western-oriented tradition, Postill (2010) sheds light on the emergence and dissemination of the concept of *Gawai* or a harvest festival. Initially introduced to the public via Radio Sarawak in the 1950s, *Gawai* faced resistance from British colonial authorities who feared its potential to catalyse political demands from the Dayak community. Anthony Richards, an authority in Iban culture and language, notably opposed the idea. However, urban Dayak intellectuals argued that an officially recognised festival would allow the Dayak community to reciprocate the hospitality shown to them by other ethnic groups during their own celebrations. It was only in 1965 that the first and second days of June were officially designated as *Gawai* by the Iban Chief Minister. Official recognition may have had a significant role in shaping the annual *Gawai* celebrations in the longhouses (Postill 2010, pp. 65–66). Richards' view that the *miring* practice was consistent, especially after 1965, becomes significant when talking about sociolinguistics of the spectres because it frames the *miring* practices as creating a social movement through adherence to these spirit-invoking practices. The idea of the socio-political power of ghosts gives the community a strong sense of its own history and reaffirms their distinct Iban identity.

Postill (2016) observes the *Gawai* celebration in a longhouse in Sibu on the morning of 31 May when, just before dawn, a gathering assembled at the *tuai rumah's* (headman's) *bilek* (individual abode). He discerned their purpose as escorting the intricately carved *Burong Kenyalang* (Hornbill) to its designated place for the *Gawai.* In line with customary practice associated with rituals linked to birth and fertility, the procession exited the longhouse through the upriver entrance and followed a circular path to reach the *tiang pengingat* (remembrance pole) erected in front of the longhouse. Postill describes how the *tuai raman,* balancing precariously on a follower's shoulder, affixed the *Burong Kenyalang* to the pole; once safely back on the ground, he received a round of applause and a cockerel. The *tuai rumah* then waved the fowl seven times and offered prayers for the wellbeing of the longhouse. Following this, there was a collective exchange of handshakes reminiscent of Christian customs (Postill 2016, pp. 73–74).

3.6 The longhouse

In the 2004 book *Report on the Iban,* Derek Freeman writes that any Iban may seek *beburong* (omens) solely for his own *bilek* (family abode). But as a longhouse community, the position of augur is held by the *tuai burong* who is responsible for safeguarding its ritual welfare.

> It is the *tuai burong* who is in charge throughout. First he determines, by the taking of auguries, if the proposed site is auspicious; then, when the moon is waxing, he gathers *kayu burong* for the ritual clearing of this site. The omen bird sought on all of these occasions is the *nendak*, whose cry is invariably 'cool' and propitious. Armed with some ten *nendak* omen sticks, and accompanied by a band of women, clad in their ikat skies, and beating gongs, the *tuai burong* leads the whole community to the selected *taba* (site). (Freeman 2004, p. 120)

Freeman's report accounted for the Iban ritual ecology when founding a longhouse. Interactions between individual Iban and the Iban community, in an environment both unseen and seen, provide more understanding of the Iban way of life. The interview excerpt below reveals how the Iban longhouse, or their living space, is very much inclusive of their spectral realm.

Excerpt 3.5: Cherang – description of offerings when building a longhouse

> The *taba* contains offerings to the gods, and it is sent to the origins of the soil. Listen carefully, as the offerings are made to ask the spirits of the soil for permission to build

a longhouse.

In this interview excerpt, my research participant, Cherang describes a *taba* (site) where offerings are made to the gods and sent to the origins of the soil. This ritual serves as a form of spectral communication with the spirits of the soil. The offerings are made not only as a sign of respect and reverence for the spirits, but also to seek their permission to construct a longhouse. This demonstrates the Iban belief that the spirit world, as represented by these soil spirits, plays a crucial role in their daily lives and activities – including in decisions about their living spaces. The spectral communication in this context reflects the depth of the Iban connection to their spiritual beliefs and their acknowledgment of the importance of maintaining a harmonious relationship with the spirit world.

In his essay *The Iban longhou*se, Stephen Anggat discusses the Iban rituals that come into play for each level of the structure of the longhouse. He explores the three categories of rituals – *bedara, gawa* and *gawai* – supported by James Jemut Masing's 1981 dissertation in cultural anthropology, each of which has a distinctive social structure and ritual processes. The *bedara' mata'* (family-oriented rituals) involve family members and are usually held in the family's *bilek*, such as for giving birth. The *bedara' mansau* (rituals involving the community) are held at the longhouse *ruai* (common gallery), and include healing rituals such as the *Sugi Sakit.* The movement of the ritual across spaces implicates the degree of the ritual itself; *gawa* rituals are essentially more complex and shift the social structure from the individual family unit to the whole community of the longhouse. The *gawai* are major bardic rites that are witnessed by guests arriving from larger river regions, such as a wedding feast (Masing 1981, pp. 34–50; Anggat 2018).

3.7 The ritual specialists

Sather (2001) notes that the Saribas Iban are a community that appreciates oral traditions and verbal artistry; even though some individuals are more proficient than others, the use of poetic language is not restricted in the past to any particular class or category of people. In terms of ritual performances, the undisputed masters of poetic language are the *lemambang* (bards), soul

guides, and *manang* (shaman). My study includes two ritual specialists: the *lemambang* and the *manang*.

In a traditional longhouse setting, an Iban bardic priest or *lemambang* is the most important person for *Gawai* or rituals held in the longhouse. Aside from divine appointment, a *lemambang* learns his art through oral tradition within a system of apprenticeship (Sutlive 1994). This positions the *lemambang* as the person who can communicate with the gods through dreams, signs, and auguries. Traditionally, the *lemambang* perform what could be described as a priestly or liturgical role. They lead public invocations and conduct the *Gawai*, which is the most elaborate ritual in an Iban longhouse. They typically perform in a troupe rather than individually in the manner of the soul guides and *manang* (Sather 2001, p. 5).

Sutlive and Sutlive (2001) describe *lemambang* as bardic priests or spirit warriors in ritual activities and explain that most *lemambang* experience a dream that leads them to assume the position. This is affirmed by Masing (1997), who recalls how "in my dream I was assuming the role of a leading *lemambang*… in my dream I was chanting the *timang* invocation…" (p. 91). After experiencing a dream, the interested individual approaches a senior or experienced *lemambang* who agrees to teach or take him on as an apprentice to learn the trade. From this training, the *lemambang* apprentice trains anywhere from three days to two weeks, pays a small amount of Malaysian *ringgit*, and is provided with objects of symbolic importance (a jar, a length of black cloth, and a knife; Sutlive and Sutlive 2001, p. 967). No apprentice studies with just one *lemambang*. Instead, after a certain length of time, the apprentice becomes a member of a three-person chorus under the lead of a *lemambang*, taking opportunities prior to each ritual performance to learn from different singers (Sutlive and Sutlive 2001b, p. 967). This is clearly one way to gain social status and even employment within the Iban community.

The next ritual specialist, the *manang* (shaman), is also central to the Iban healing ritual (Sutlive and Sutlive 2001, p. 1035) and mainly called to address illness or inauspicious dreams and omens (Sather 2001, p. 10). The *manang*'s role involves functioning as a mediator between the patient and the illnesses they might suffer. Though some *manang* use herbal treatments, the main role of a *manang* is to engage in a magical flight of sorts to remove foreign objects or get rid of predatory spirits (Sutlive and Sutlive 2001b, p. 1035). Sather (2001) explains that the rites performed by a *manang* are known as *pelian* (healing ritual) and a *manang*'s soul journeys through different parts of the cosmos depending on the types of *pelian*. While the soul of an ordinary person can also leave their bodies and sometimes visit other worlds, only shamans are

thought to have the power to direct the movement or travel of their souls and perform deeds within unseen regions through help from personal spirit guides and other spirit shaman companions (Sather 2001, p. 11). Sather adds that the *pelian* most performed were to retrieve a lost or captured soul. Other tasks include the defeating of evil spirits, tending to a patient's *ayu* (plant image), or erecting the *pelepa* (unseen protective barriers around the patient's home).

Sutlive and Sutlive (2001) also recorded how, when a *manang*'s death, his kits are left to his immediate family. A son or daughter who assumes responsibility is said to *ngangkat ka lupung* (raise up the kit). However, even these next of kin must receive their own calling. My study involved five ritual specialists who had received their own callings. Five were *lemambang* with their own bardic troupe; three of the five were also *manang* and received many invitations to perform healing rituals from a wide range of people, including businesspeople from Brunei.

Excerpt 3.6 Chendan – explanation of his sense of self

> I can call myself a *lemambang*, yes. I said so because I am a person of reference and I am always invited to perform the *miring* whenever there is a *Gawai antu* (Significant ritual for the dead). I am called to invoke the gods and ancestors and I have my own '*lemambang* circle'. Therefore, I am confident that I am a *lemambang*.

In excerpt 3.6 above, Chendan identifies himself as a *lemambang* within the Iban community. This role carries significant cultural and sociolinguistic implications, particularly in terms of spectral communication. First, Chendan's claim to being a *lemambang* highlights the cultural importance of this role among the Ibans. *Lemambangs* are individuals of great significance and authority within their community. They are called on to perform rituals – particularly during *Gawai antu*, a significant ceremony for the deceased. Their role involves invoking the gods and ancestors, emphasising the spiritual and ritualistic aspects of their communication. Spectral communication in this context refers to interactions between the living and the spiritual realm, which includes gods and ancestors.

Chendan's assertion that he is a *lemambang* underscores his ability to facilitate this form of communication, making him a conduit between the physical and spiritual worlds. His statement also highlights the specific language and linguistic practices associated with his role as a *lemambang*. These linguistic practices can include the *sampi*, prayers, and incantations uttered during rituals. Chendan further mentions having his own '*lemambang* circle', indicating a

specialised linguistic community or network associated with this role that employs specific terminology and linguistic features.

In essence, Chendan's self-identification as a *lemambang* reflects the integral role of spectral communication within the Iban cultural and ritual context. It underscores the significance of language and linguistic practices in bridging the gap between the living and the spiritual, showcasing how sociolinguistic phenomena are intertwined with cultural and spiritual dimensions in the Iban community.

3.8 The ritual *sampi* (chants)

One of the most vital components of the *miring* is the *sampi*. In his 1981 anthropological dissertation *The coming of the gods*, ex-Sarawak political minister James Masing discusses the *timang amat*, or ritual chants at significant feasts, and their association with the *Gawai amat* – a significant ritual feast in the Iban community. These ritual chants evolved to accommodate the narrative of the migration of the Ibans in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries from the Kapuas region (present-day Indonesia), a lengthy process that ebbed and flowed in population (Freeman 1970; Pringle 1970; Sandin 1957). An earlier version of the ritual chants came to prominence through a need for supernatural favours to become effective warriors. The sustainability of these ancient chants and rites once integral to Iban warfare and headhunting evolved into maintaining the identity of contemporary Ibans within a rapidly changing world. Masing acknowledges that the Iban of Sarawak possessed a large body of oral literature that was passed down across the generations (1981, p. 11). This literature, he notes, contained a substantial number of ritual chants and songs sung during ritual occasions.

Conducted between 1978–1981, Masing's cultural anthropological study is over forty years old. His setting depicts a different geographical engagement than the Krian River Iban in the sense that the Balleh river Iban have a different historical background shaping their oral literature and corpus of ritual. Regardless of the era, however, Masing's translation has contributed to proper documentation of the Iban ritual chant.

In 2018, Japanese scholar Goro Hasegawa closely followed Masing's fieldwork in the Kapit district of Sarawak to find that some *gawai* rituals had withstood the passage of time, despite local perceptions that the practise was disappearing. His replication of Masing's dissertation

thirty-seven years later, in a concise journal article, provides evidence of the present state of *gawai* tradition and *sampi*, by extension.

Some of my participants recalled *miring* as associated with rice planting. Freeman (2014, p.155) reports that the Ibans treated the *padi* (rice) spirits as having a society of their own, addressing them as if they were real humans. Freeman (2004) further noted how the *sampi* provided insight into the Iban attitude of respect towards their *padi* (rice). They were continuously concerned with avoiding any behaviour that might offend the *padi* spirits; if any *padi* was spilt on the ground, it would be retrieved most dutifully and the offending Iban would whisper words of apology (Freeman 2004, p.155b). Many cultures have a reverence for sustenance that is more a principle towards life than actual respect for the rice itself. In the case of the Ibans, however, the rice is also believed to carry the spirits of ancestors. Still, it is important to recall that these spiritual rules play a social role as well. In this case, I would argue that the sacredness of sustenance is what brings the Iban community together (through harvests and agrarian culture). In a sense, it protects the community spirit.

In *Sampi: the richness and the power of the word*, Janang Ensiring (2014) contends that *sampi* is a tool for the intergenerational transmission of knowledge, transmitting words of wisdom and philosophy from one generation to the other (p. 48). However, Ensiring's work only focuses on the depiction of the *sampi* narrative and does not demonstrate any evidence of intergenerational transmission of knowledge across generations of Ibans. He provides *sampi* narratives in the classical Iban language of oral traditions that must be accompanied by a healthy cockerel, *Bunsu Manuk*, or the Spirit of the Cockerel who acts as an intercessor between a human celebrant and the gods and spirits. *Bunsu Manuk* also acts as a messenger in the *ngambi petara ngabang* routine, inviting the pantheon of gods and spirits to attend the rituals or religious ceremonies (Ensiring 2014, p. 43). Ensiring's narrative details the movement of the spirits, which my study responds to by investigating any intergenerational transmission of knowledge and changes in the roles of the bardic priest and the spirits themselves at present.

Motomitsu Uchibori (2014) recounts his experience observing an Iban shamanic ritual *serara bungai* (separation of the recently deceased) from the living in a longhouse in the Upper Skrang river in October 1976. Uchibori stated that the Iban ontology encapsulated the whole corpus of notions shared by a group of people about what exists, whether animate or inanimate, in the milieu of their lives (Uchibori 2014, p. 27). He burrows into the ritual itself, wherein the lives of the deceased and living are represented by the *bungai* or flower and how it started with the

shaman preparing the ritual paraphernalia in view of a group of elderly Iban women. One of the women began to relate a dream she had the previous night in which she met the deceased in a forest near the longhouse.

Similarly, Varney (2014) recorded contemporary *sabak* singers, such as Simba ak Gelau in the Saribas region, open to adapting traditional chants for Christian contexts even if they are not Christian themselves. Simba, who spent two years mastering the traditional dirge, maintains the traditional structure but incorporates Christian themes when performing *sabak* at Christian burials. Her interpretation of the experience is symbolic rather than literal, involving a journey that includes encountering angels and ultimately escorting the soul of the deceased to the Christian *sebayan*. Simba's account aligns with the belief of many Christian Ibans that their journey after death extends beyond *Sebayan* and leads to heaven or to God's realm (Varney 2014, p. 5).

Both Uchibori (2014) and Varney (2014) touch on the sociolinguistics of the spectre in the context of Iban rituals. Uchibori discusses the *serara bungai* ritual, wherein the deceased and the living are represented symbolically by a *bungai* (flower). The ritual involves communication between the living and the deceased through dreams and visions, blurring the boundaries between the physical and spectral worlds. This highlights the role of dreams and communication with the deceased as a form of spectral communication in Iban culture. In the second extract, Simba ak Gelau's adaptation of traditional *sabak* chants for Christian contexts demonstrates how linguistic and ritual practices can evolve to accommodate changing beliefs and worldviews. The incorporation of Christian themes into *sabak* chants reflects the sociolinguistic aspect of adapting language and communication to align with religious shifts. Simba's account also reveals the fusion of Iban beliefs with Christian notions, illustrating the complex interplay between traditional and Christian spectres within the sociolinguistic framework of the Iban community.

In *Seeds of play, words of power*, Sather (2001) emphasises the sung words of the *pelian* (healing ritual). He further provides an example of *serara bungai* (separation of the recently deceased).

> 'How very reluctant I am to be severed by Nyara',
>
> The transformed Gendai,
> For I still wish to seek riches in this world'.
> Behold, the dead are sitting with their knees folded

at the base of the fragrant flower,
Their hands hold the top of two branches.
In the palms of their hands they hold the stalk
of the *kenanga* flower.

‘ How unwilling I am to part from the happy, daring bachelors,
For I should clearly like to watch over them in their youth,
Those who have yet to learn to recognize the proper way to behave’.

Behold, the Dead one sits pensively at the base
of the fragrant nanyi flower.
His teardrops fall steadily,
And, lamenting, he weeps loudly,
For he is reluctant to leave behind his happy son
And the others longhouse who make merry
like traders in the bazaar.

Then, speaks Lansu’, Shaman Usam,
‘How can I not separate you?
For you have died, because the gods no longer
Watch over you’. (Sather 2001, pp. 357–359)

In this chant, the deceased spirit expresses a reluctance to be severed from the living world and its connections with the community. The spirit’s attachment to the living, especially to the young and happy bachelors, demonstrates the sociolinguistic aspect of spectral communication. The spirit communicates its desire to continue to watch over and guide the living, emphasising the relationship between the living and the spectral world.

Shaman Usam’s response highlights the separation that death brings, indicating a shift in the spiritual realm. The chant encapsulates the complex interplay between the living and the spectral world, where communication and relationships persist even after death. This sociolinguistic perspective within Iban rituals reflects the ongoing presence of the deceased in the lives of the living, emphasising the importance of maintaining connections with the spectral realm for guidance and protection.

Sather (2001) notes that the primary invocation songs sung by the *lemambang* are called *pengap* or *timang*. He adds that the two words vary regionally; in the Saribas, Krian and Skrang, the central *Gawai* chants are known as *pengap*. Masing (1997) reports they are called *timang*

in the region of Upper Rejang and Batang Ai. The latter term is used in the Saribas and Saratok regions to refer to a variety of praise songs subsidiary to the main narrative, which are sung during a *Gawai* performance (Sandin 1977, p. 6; Sather 1994, p. 64 in Sather 2001, p. 5). The *pengap* constitutes an invocational liturgy in which the gods are called down to this world at the invitation of the *Orang Panggau* (spirit heroes) so they may participate in the work of the *Gawai* as ritual visitors (p. 5).

My investigation offers three ritual *sampi* (chants) performed voluntarily by my participants during the course of their interviews. The *sampi* demonstrated by my participants served a purpose beyond their role of summoning spirits as they also provided a means of interaction with the rich cultural and historical legacy of the Iban people. (see Chapter 7.2).

3.9 *Piring* (food offering)

Gertrud Huwelmeier (2021) proposes that the 'otherworld' becomes accessible and tangible through specific practices, such as cooking for spirits and presenting devotional food and objects. Her investigation reveals the significance of food in Vietnamese practices and sheds light on how believers perceive their relationship with their ancestors, deities, and other spiritual beings (Huwelmeier 2021, p. 108). She adds that in certain urban religious sites in Hanoi, pig heads are offered to local deities and the medium prepares large quantities of food before conducting spirit possession rituals. These practices serve as crucial means of communication with the deceased, demonstrating the significance of food in establishing a connection to the otherworld.

Huwelmeier (2021) emphasises that food plays a critical role in manifesting otherworldly beings during rituals. The exploration of people's bodily experiences with the beyond, alongside the context of preparing and celebrating food for spirits in Vietnam, are vital elements to understanding how individuals communicate with these spirits and deceased (Huwelmeier 2021, p. 109). Elizabeth Perez (2021) researches the kitchen of Ile Laroye and finds that the kitchen space holds importance owing to its association with complex forms of labour. Post-sacrifice food is especially instrumental in preparing the demanding role of Lucumi priesthood (Perez 2021, p. 1).

For the Ibans, food offerings known as *piring* represent a form of communication with the spiritual world. These offerings are a way of conveying respect and contacting gods and ancestors. Sutlive and Sutlive (2001) detail how the offerings primarily consist of various forms of rice, including rice that is boiled (*asi*), puffed (*rendai*), glutinous (*asi pulut*), steamed in leaf packets (*ketupat*), and fried into cakes (*tumpi*). Salt is an essential ingredient as it is one of the two permissible foods for mothers during the first month after childbirth. These rice varieties are complemented by symbols of hospitality, such as tobacco (*semakau*), leaves for wrapping cigarettes (*daun apung* or *gentu*), betel nut (*buah pinang*), gambier leaves (*sirih*), rice wine (*tuak*), and eggs (*telu*). An officiant, typically the senior member of a family, takes each ingredient one by one and places it on a plate or in a basket, assembling the offering. A complete offering is comprised of eight dishes of each ingredient and known as *piring lapan*.

During a *sampi* (chant), the officiant employs the couplet, *Piring tujuh, piring penuh, piring lapan, piring penyaran* ["an offering of seven parts, an offering full to the brim, an offering of eight parts, to which all may gather"]. In some communities, particularly in the middle Rejang region, the offerings are sprinkled with rice wine once they are prepared. The placement of offerings depends on the specific ritual being observed. For instance, offerings made for the sake of health may be positioned on top of split bamboo poles. Offerings meant to appease the spirit of an animal or bird that has entered a house are typically placed at the front and back entrances as well as at the head of the stairs leading from the family room to the loft. The strategic placement of offerings is determined by their perceived importance to the success of the activity at hand (Sutlive and Sutlive 2001, p. 1036).

Ensiring (2014) emphasises that the *sampi* in turn must be accompanied by presentation of the *piring*. The failure to prepare an array of food offerings would simply incur the wrath of the invited gods and spirits who expect something in return for the favours requested of them (Ensiring 2014, pp. 42–43).

Aside from preparing the rice, the Iban women are responsible for preparing other food and various items intended for the *piring*. The assortment of offerings includes *asi*, *rendai*, *tuak* (rice wine), *sungki* and *ketupat* (rice cakes), salt, eggs, tobacco, areca nuts, and betel leaves (Sutlive and Sutlive 2001, p. 1037). In the next excerpt from my interview data, an interviewee named Daud reflects on the food offerings during the *miring* ceremony in his longhouse.

3.10 Trophy head agency

Analyses of Iban headhunting stress the symbolism of the severed head. Freeman (1979, pp. 233–246) sets out to explain the Indigenous account of the severed head as a container of seed. He argues that "the trophy heads by which the Iban set such stores have a phallic significance as symbols of the generative power of nature" (Freeman 1979, p. 237).

Sutlive and Sutlive (2001) advocate for clarification of the use of trophy heads in a ritual context. They compare key symbolic interpretations offered by Freeman (1979) and Davidson and Sutlive (1991) to discern that the link between the act of obtaining a head and fertility has posed a central challenge to anthropological attempts to comprehend headhunting as a cultural phenomenon. Freeman (1979) contends that trophy heads carry a phallic connotation, drawing from psychoanalytic theory, while Davidson and Sutlive (1991) propose that an explanation lies within the metaphor's association with the head during Iban rituals (Sutlive and Sutlive 2001).

Sutlive and Sutlive (2001) explain the understandings offered by Freeman (1979) and Davidson and Sutlive (1991) as follows: the former suggests that the sacred rice and other plants symbolising the seed flowing out from the ritual splitting of a trophy head (involving the use of a coconut) was akin to semen, while the latter interpret this along with the other metaphors in *timang gawai amat* (significant harvest ritual) as representing a botanical model of reproduction. They identified three key themes: the depiction of trophy heads as the product of the *ranyai* palm; the ceremonial treatment of trophy heads resembling infants; and the allegorical portrayal of headhunting as akin to agriculture. When the trophy heads are brought to the longhouse, they are treated as infants who cry. To pacify those cries, Freeman (1979, p. 241) asserts that the heads are cared for by several female spirits and handed over to the *manang bali* (a male shaman possessed by a female spirit) who attempts to nurture it until the crying ceases and the head begins to laugh. Conversely, Davidson and Sutlive (1991, p. 193) argue that the crying and discontent stemmed from the head's search for its parents and once transferred to the wife of the ritual sponsor, the infant immediately ceases.

In an article for *The Borneo Post*, Edward (2023) reports that a total of 16 trophy heads were respectfully buried near a longhouse in Dasey, Krian, following a Christian ceremony. Representing the Anglican church, Canon Dennis Gimang conducted the necessary prayers for repentance and deliverance to facilitate this burial ritual. It is worth noting that Ali Biju, Member of Parliament for Saratok, was also in attendance during the significant event. Canon Gimang led a congregation consisting of 19 longhouse families, guiding them through the process of repentance and deliverance to free their souls from the historical burdens associated with the trophy heads. The event marked an unprecedented moment in the history of Krian, Saratok, as it was the first time such a ceremonial act had taken place in this area.

The symbolic interment of the trophy heads occurred within a designated section of the Christian cemetery selected with care for this purpose. Canon Gimang explains that he conducted the services at the request of Tuai Rumah Gayan, the longhouse leader, and the three guardians of the trophy heads. These guardians, the eighth generation of their ancestral lineage, had diligently preserved the artefacts. One significant motivation behind the decision of Christian Ibans to bury these trophy heads was their changing perspective regarding the appropriateness of keeping relics that symbolised a contentious historical past within their religious beliefs. Many descendants of these longhouses, particularly those who had relocated to urban areas, had grown uncomfortable with the presence of these unsettling trophies displayed on their verandas during the *Gawai* festival. In addition, the guardians of the trophy heads had shared eerie experiences of seeing apparitions and spiritual phenomena within their living spaces, which they attributed to the lingering spirits associated with the artefacts. During this momentous occasion, MP Ali Biju delivered an address that highlighted the importance of embracing a renewed Christian faith and relinquishing customs that no longer aligned with their Christian beliefs (https://www.theborneopost.com/2023/01/21/16-*antu-pala*-in-ulu-krian-buried).

Edward's (2023) report reflects the complex dynamics of the post-colonial sociolinguistics of the spectres. The fact that this burial ceremony involved Christian rituals from the Anglican church signifies a significant shift in the cultural and religious landscape of the Iban community. The presence of an MP further highlights recognition and acceptance of these changes at a broader societal level. The act of liberating the souls from the historical burdens associated with trophy heads signifies a collective effort to reconcile the Iban community's traditional practices with the influence of Christianity and modernity. This report showcases the evolution of sociolinguistic dynamics in post-colonial contexts where Indigenous cultures and beliefs are negotiated, adapted, and sometimes transformed in response to external forces such as religion and politics.

3.11 *Kelam ai* (trial by water).

The *kelam ai*, a traditional water trial, acts as a channel of communication between conflicting parties and the spiritual realm. It is characterised as a ceremonial process employed to settle disputes, underscoring its cultural significance within the Iban community. Elders and community members employ distinct linguistic and ritual practices to guarantee the trial's efficacy and impartiality. In cases where guilt or innocence was uncertain, representatives from conflicting parties would immerse themselves completely in a river or body of water. The individual who could remain submerged the longest would be declared the winner, and their side would be deemed righteous in the matter (Sandin 1994, p. 47).

Excerpt 3.6: Cherang – introduction to the *kelam ai*

> C: I was in Kedoh when I witnessed this.
> L: So, what is this *kelam ai*, Elder father, can you describe what you saw?
> C: Yes, for this particular *kelam ai*. It involved Talak, a man from Brayang. And Talak had a land dispute with Mujah, also from Brayang. They were both from Brayang. They fought for a piece of land.
> L: Okay.
> C: The dispute was not settled by the longhouse, they also found the dispute very difficult to resolve, so both parties agree for a *kelam ai*,
> L: Who fought with Talak, again?
> C: Fighting over a piece of land,

In this interview excerpt with my study participant Cherang, he recounts witnessing a *kelam ai* as a young man. The excerpt reveals the significance of spectral communication in the *kelam*

ai ritual as the account illustrates how the dispute between Talak and Mujah, both from the same longhouse, escalated to the point where conventional methods of resolution were ineffective. Consequently, the parties agreed to undergo the *kelam ai* as a means of seeking supernatural intervention to settle their dispute. By turning to the spirit world for arbitration of contentious matters, the Ibans demonstrate a belief in the efficacy of spectral communication.

The excerpt further demonstrates the nature of the spectral thinking ingrained in Iban society, particularly in the context of resolving disputes. The decision to engage in *kelam ai* reflects the Iban belief in the influence of spirits or gods in determining the outcome of conflicts. This ritual stems from the belief that spirits or gods would supernaturally assist and prolong the truthful party's ability to hold their breath underwater. Sutlive (1992, p. 28) elaborates, stating that when it was challenging to determine right and wrong, the contest aimed to resolve complex disputes by appealing to and being judged by the *petara* (gods).

Through submersion in water, the participants invoke the assistance of supernatural forces they believe will aid the truthful party and ensure a just resolution. This reflects a broader cultural worldview characterised by spectral thinking, wherein the spirit world is perceived as actively involved in shaping human affairs. This interview snippet offers valuable insights into the sociolinguistics of the spectres within the Iban community, particularly in the context of spectral communication and spectral thinking. By examining the linguistic and cultural dimensions of the *kelam ai* ritual, we gain a deeper understanding of how sociocultural beliefs and practices shape communication strategies and conflict resolution processes among the Ibans.

However, the *kelam ai* practice was officially banned by the Brooke government that governed Sarawak in the nineteenth century The British colonial authorities viewed this water ordeal as a primitive and uncivilised ritual based on superstition, which they believed needlessly endangered lives (Runciman 1960, p.166). Instances occurred where participants drowned or succumbed to exhaustion during these trials. Furthermore, the Brooke regime sought to modernise Sarawak's legal system away from traditional tribal customs, such as *kelam ai* (Janowski 2003, p. xliv).

Chapter summary

In this chapter, I have reviewed the complex tapestry of the Iban *miring* rituals. The literature highlights the centrality of dreams, animal signs and omens, and spectral communication in the Iban spiritual landscape, underscoring the intricate interplay between the living and the spiritual realms. The roles of ritual specialists, such as the *lemambang* and *manang*, are crucial in maintaining these traditions, as are the various ritual practices and chants that reinforce the community's connection to their spiritual heritage.

The sociolinguistics of the spectres play a significant role in understanding the *miring* rituals. The way language and communication bridge the gap between the physical and spiritual realms is evident in their *sampi*, and these ritual practices not only serve to invoke and appease spirits but also reinforce social cohesion and cultural continuity within the Iban community.

As I move forward to Chapter 4, I will explore the research methodology employed in this study. This next chapter will focus on the interview method, detailing how interviews were conducted to gather in-depth insights from participants about their experiences and perspectives on the *miring* rituals.

Chapter Four: Insider-researcher, data collection and participants' recruitment

*"Thank you for interviewing me. I hope you **record** important things about our Iban culture [miring] in your thesis. If we depend only on our elders, much of the Iban knowledge will be lost."* Radin

Introduction

This chapter explores how the field of the sociolinguistics of the spectres illuminates the intricacies of Iban culture, with a specific focus on their *miring* rituals. I begin by establishing the philosophical underpinnings that shape my approach to this investigation, acknowledging the importance of worldview and philosophical orientations as outlined by Creswell (2014). My research drew on interpretive ethnographic methods to provide a nuanced description of *miring* culture and its associated phenomena. As such, it is crucial to recognise the influence of philosophical assumptions on the ontology, epistemology, and methodology of the research process, as emphasised by Lincoln, Lynham, and Guba (2018). The chapter will describe the ontological and epistemological considerations, influences on the design caused by a pilot study and Covid-19 restrictions, the research questions, and the stance of insider-research. Additionally, design elements in relation to data gathering using interviews and analysis are explored, along with participant selection and ethical considerations.

4.1 Research design

4.1.1 Pilot study

Details of the Pilot Study

The methodology for this study initially aimed to conduct ethnographic research to explore an Iban longhouse. In 2019, the pilot study involved an exploration of an Iban's way of living in their longhouse and their ritual practices, particularly focusing on the *Gawai Dayak* ritual proceedings. The study sought to explore the descriptions of *miring* rituals by the Ibans in my longhouse in Roban, Sarawak, and identify any changes in their *miring* practices. My role as both researcher and community member allowed me to observe and document everyday

practices and the *miring* ceremonies. The pilot study was instrumental in shaping the direction of the present thesis, generating findings that informed the research questions and provided insight into the intricacies of *miring* rituals and spectral communication within the Iban community. Observations during the pilot study revealed shifts in *miring* practices in the longhouse, such as changes in participant representation and tensions surrounding the selection of ritual leaders. Additionally, the pilot study employed semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to share oral traditions and narratives, providing valuable insights into the Iban *miring* rituals and spectral beliefs.

This phase helped refine the research questions, as it highlighted key themes such as the evolving nature of *miring* practices, the changing roles of participants, and the tensions surrounding the selection of ritual leaders. The semi-structured interviews conducted during the pilot study allowed participants to share oral traditions and narratives, shedding light on their beliefs about spectral communication and the spiritual significance of the *miring* rituals. This ethnographic approach provided early insight into how *miring* continues to serve as a critical means of interacting with gods, spirits, and ancestors, even as these practices adapt to modernity.

Excerpt 4.0: A pilot study fieldnote describing a pre-*Gawai miring* ritual in the longhouse.

31st May 2019

1800 *Miring* ceremony

Before the start of the *miring* the *tuai rumah* delivered his welcoming speech to the participants of the ritual. He urged the longhouse community to stay united and work together in maintaining a harmonious longhouse. He also encouraged the members who stay far away from the longhouse to give support to the activities and happenings in the longhouse such as not neglecting responsibilities to attend any funerals, or weddings of any members of the longhouse. He also encouraged the longhouse folks to support *Apai* Angga who is leading the ritual for this year's *gawai*. *Apai* Angga was always the 'shadow' of MP in conducting rituals and now he found himself in the spotlight. A soft-spoken man, he led ritual, firstly with the invocation of the gods. He had secured a live white chicken with his left arm and started chanting with the counting of one to seven. Then he invoked the gods and ancestors to attend this year's harvest and invite them by also gesturing towards the

offering prepared by his other five assistants. One of the assistants is Tupo, MP's grandson.

The participant of the rituals are mostly *representatives* from each *bilek* in the longhouse. Each will bring along rice wine, soft drinks and cakes as part of the offerings. Later, they will bring back the beverages to bless the other family member from their *bilek* . Jelawai, MP's eldest daughter, is the representative participant from his *bilek* and I was sitting next to her during the whole ceremony.

Apai Angga continued chanting for more than 30 minutes and pulled a feather from the chicken to draw a trickle of blood. When I was younger, I remembered the chicken sacrificed and its warm blood sputtering, often to our heads. Now it seems wasteful for a whole chicken to be sacrificed in such way and a trickle of the fowl's blood was enough to indicate blessings. *Apai* Angga then scatters rice pops to the participants and the five assistants start serving the now blessed rice wine and soft drinks firstly among themselves and secondly to the other participants. It is believed that the beverages have been blessed to rid misfortunes and illness and bring good tidings to the participants.

MP = Main participant

The excerpt from the pilot fieldnote reflected the *tuai rumah's* speech, the *miring* ritual in strengthening the social structure and relationships within the longhouse. My observation of this interaction during this stage informed the main study by highlighting how the *miring* rituals are deeply embedded in the social fabric of the Ibans, with the ritual leaders—such as Apai Angga—taking on spiritual and social mediation roles.

The fieldnote also revealed the changing nature of *miring* traditions. Firstly, *Apai* Angga went from his previous role as an assistant priest to the role of a bardic priest. His transition from "shadow" to leader highlighted a generational shift in ritual leadership, a theme central to the main study's exploration of how *miring practices* sustain over time. Additionally, observing the adaptation in the sacrificial practices—where a small amount of the fowl's blood was now used instead of the complete sacrifice seen previously—suggested a shift in the ritual's material elements, pointing to changes in the Iban *miring*.

Furthermore, observing the longhouse community, where members from each *bilek* brought offerings or *piring*, fortified the idea that *miring* is a collective communication between the living and the spirit world. Sharing blessed rice wine and soft drinks illustrated how these *piring* serve as communicative tools that transmit blessings and social obligations within the longhouse. This observation informed the central thesis by shaping a key research question: How do Ibans communicate with spirits, gods and ancestors?

Figure 4.0: The *tuai rumah,* delivers his speech before the start of the *Gawai* eve *miring* ritual.

During this phase, I also took photographs capturing various rituals and aspects of communal life in the longhouse. Figure 4.0, for instance, shows the *tuai rumah* addressing the longhouse community before the pre-*Gawai miring* ceremony, emphasizing the importance of unity and encouraging those who live outside the longhouse to return, especially during significant events such as weddings, the *Gawai* celebration, or in the event of a member's passing. For my main thesis, I have chosen to include some of these photographs to enhance my data analysis, providing visual context that illustrates the miring rituals.

The pilot study thus became instrumental in shaping the direction of the main thesis by uncovering themes of ritual specialists' roles, evolving ritual practices, and the multifaceted nature of *miring* as a communicative practice between the living and the spirit world. These insights laid the groundwork for exploring how *miring* rituals link the material and spiritual realms and function as essential aspects of the sociolinguistics of the spectres.

The data collection during the pilot reflected by the photograph and fieldnote on the *miring* ritual observed in the longhouse provided a foundation for understanding the evolving roles of ritual specialists and the changing material used during *miring* practices. These became central to the main thesis' exploration of *miring* as a communicative practice for the sociolinguistics of the spectres.

Impact on the Main Study

Although the pilot study provided rich ethnographic data and informed the structure of the thesis, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the methodology for the main study. With travel and in-person interaction restrictions in place, it became impossible to conduct additional fieldwork in the longhouse. As a result, the main study had to be adapted, relying solely on online interviews with participants from the community.

Methodological Adaptation Due to COVID-19

The pandemic necessitated a shift from in-person ethnographic methods to remote data collection through online interviews. While this posed limitations in terms of participant observation and ritual documentation, the insights gained from the pilot study ensured that I had a foundational understanding of the *miring* rituals and everyday practices of the community. The pilot study thus served as the primary source of ethnographic insights, while the online interviews in the main study were designed to build upon and expand the themes identified during the pilot phase.

Refinement of Research Questions

The pilot study revealed key aspects of *miring* practices that were further investigated through the online interviews. These included how the Ibans describe their *miring* practices and how do Ibans say they communicate with spirits, gods, and ancestors. The main study's research questions were thus shaped by the findings from the pilot study, focusing on how these rituals continue to evolve and how spectral communication is maintained in the community.

Photographs from the pilot study is offered in the data analysis chapters of the thesis to help describe the discussion of *miring* practices, particularly in relation to the findings from the online interviews. For instance, photographs of trophy heads, preparation of the *piring*, welcoming wedding guests and Iban agricultural activities are used to support analyses in the discussion of the *miring* ceremonies.

Confidentiality and Anonymity in Small-Scale and Kinship-Based Research

The pilot study also presented challenges related to confidentiality and anonymity, given the close-knit nature of the longhouse community and my kinship ties within it. As an insider, I

had access to sensitive cultural practices, but this also raised ethical concerns about protecting the identities of participants, especially in a small community where individuals are easily identifiable.

Informed Consent and Anonymity

Therefore, participants were fully informed about the research objectives and the potential limitations of ensuring full anonymity in such a tight-knit community. I obtained informed consents and kept on reminding the participants of their rights throughout each interview process with explicit discussions regarding the use of pseudonyms and the risks of identification due to familial connections. I did not disclose the description of the participants' longhouse and *bilek* to strengthen their respective anonymity.

Data Sensitivity

The data collected during the pilot study, especially concerning social tensions or changes in ritual practices, was handled with care. To protect participants' identities, sensitive narratives were either omitted or presented in generalized terms. This was particularly important when describing tensions related to ritual leadership, as this could potentially identify specific individuals or families within the longhouse.

Visual Data and Ethics

The photographs taken during the pilot study were only included in the thesis with participants' consent. Particular attention was given to selecting visuals that did not reveal personal or sensitive details about the participants or the rituals, ensuring that their privacy was respected.

Reflexivity

Throughout the pilot and main study, I remained reflexive about my position as both a community member and researcher. This required constant attention to how my insider status might influence the data collection process and my relationships with participants. By maintaining open communication with the community, I worked to ensure that the research was conducted ethically, and that participants' perspectives were accurately represented.

4.1.2 Covid-19

The unwelcomed pandemic that affected life around the world also impacted the course of my study. Consequently, I was no longer able to travel home to observe, collect field notes, or employ face-to-face interviews on the *miring* ritual. This disruption to my initial study plans led to uncertainty about how to proceed with data collection. I had intended to return home to Borneo in December 2020 to conduct ethnographic observations, but the pandemic scare halted long-haul flights. Given these challenges, adjustments to data collection methods were necessary. Initially, the timeline for data gathering required reassessment due to the University of Stirling's prohibition on in-person data collection, pending a review in autumn 2020. Moreover, travel posed heightened health risks, especially in airports, complicating journeys from Scotland to my longhouse in Borneo. The Sarawak state government's post-lockdown directives, limiting gatherings to twenty individuals per household, further necessitated adaptations in data collection strategies. Consequently, the pandemic's impact required implementing a contingency plan involving online interviews if traditional fieldwork was impeded.

To elicit data under these new circumstances, online in-depth interviews were seen to be the most effective method of gathering data (discussed later in this chapter). I drafted a mitigation plan to keep my study on course, focusing on online interviews with 10 to 12 participants from the Krian River network in Sarawak.

Starting in January 2021, I conducted interviews via online platforms.

However, this shift to solely online interviews carried several implications for my original data-collection plan. First, the philosophical foundation of ethnography was replaced with an interview study from an insider's perspective, shifting the research subjectivity from the community to the researcher. This shift limited the direct observation of existing ritual practices. Additionally, the involvement of older participants was reduced due to their difficulties with online mediums, and relying on others for help risked their anonymity and compromised social distancing measures. These concerns will be explored in more detail later in this chapter.

4.1.3 Research questions

Building on the insights gained from the pilot study and the literature review in the previous chapter, this study explores into the cultural and spiritual dimensions of the Ibans of Sarawak, focusing on two fundamental research questions:

1. How do Ibans describe their *miring* practices?

2. How do Ibans communicate with spirits, gods and ancestors?

The first research question aims to explore Ibans' *miring* practices comprehensively, uncovering the meanings and cultural significance in these ceremonies. The second question investigates Ibans' beliefs and experiences related to communicating with spirits, gods, and ancestors, with a focus on understanding the meanings in these encounters. By investigating these aspects, the research endeavours to illuminate the intricate tapestry of Iban spirituality, traditional knowledge, and communal identity. This exploration seeks to reveal the spectral communication and spectral thinking in the Ibans' way of living.

4.1.4 Research context

My research context is rooted deeply within the cultural fabric of the Iban tribe along the Seblak River, a tributary of the Krian River network. As an active participant in the rituals and ceremonies of my longhouse at Bratong Atas, Roban, and neighbouring longhouses, I possess a profound understanding of our cultural traditions and community dynamics. Utilising my kinship connections, I have embarked on kinship research, leveraging my familial ties to recruit participants from the Krian area. Through personal introductions facilitated by my *apai biak* (younger father), whom I've anonymised as "Lindong," I had the privilege of interviewing two esteemed *Temenggong* (community leaders). These connections not only provided access to participants but also laid the foundation for establishing trust and rapport essential for meaningful research interactions.

The inherent advantages of kinship research in our cultural context are manifold. Firstly, my intimate familiarity with Iban traditions ensures a nuanced and respectful approach to research, minimising the risk of cultural misinterpretations. Secondly, the bonds of kinship foster a sense of trust and openness among participants, facilitating candid discussions and insights into their reported experiences. Moreover, conducting research within my own community enables me to navigate ethical considerations with sensitivity and accountability, prioritising the well-

being and interests of participants. By actively involving community members in the research process, I aim to empower and collaborate with them, fostering a sense of ownership over our shared cultural heritage. In the next section of this thesis, I will explore the links between the context and research that were supported by the research design.

4.2 The researcher positionality

I am an insider for my study, and it is only appropriate to stress its importance in this chapter. An insider researcher can be considered as an academic who is part of the community research and who conducts research involving populations of which s/he is also a member (Asselin, 2003; Erdal, Ezzati, and Carling 2013; Kanuha 2000; McDermid, Peters, Jackson, & Daly, 2014). The identity of an insider researcher is significant in the research because it carries personal demographic characteristics, expectations, and biases (Kirpitchenko & Voloder, 2014:3). Recent studies give more recognition to pre-existing knowledge and experiences of researchers because of their role as the authors of the research and creators of new knowledge. An insider's research can highlight all the research processes involved, from conceiving to recording and writing (Fleming 2008:310). Raheim et al. (2016) observes that the relationships between the researcher(s) and those being researched is a recurrent concern in methodology literature, with a strong emphasis on the privileged position of the former vis-a-vis the latter. Common considerations include the essential power imbalance between the researcher and researched and relevant ethical concerns, with particular attention paid to predetermined and imbalanced roles. However, the literature simultaneously emphasises how qualitative traditions all have "...a common epistemological ground: the researcher's determination to minimise the distance and separateness of researcher–participant" (Raheim et al. 2016, p. 1). In the next part of this chapter, the ideas of kinship research will be contextualised to my study.

4.2.1 The kinship researcher

For the Ibans, relationships primarily revolve around kinship ties, with the utmost priority given to providing for and protecting one's kin. Sutlive Jr (1991) and Freeman (2004) suggest kin groups encompass not only biologically related individuals but also those adopted into the family. Ibans recognize several units, each with its own intricate network of relationships,

including the *bilik-family*, the kin-group, the brotherhood, and ultimately the broader Iban community. Family membership is defined by both biological and affinity ties, with members establishing and maintaining connections through various familial bonds, including parentage and more distant kinship relations, (Sutlive Jr, 1991, p.7; Freeman, 2004, pp. 22-23). This is demonstrated below in Figure 4.1 in a diagram reflecting the Iban kinship.

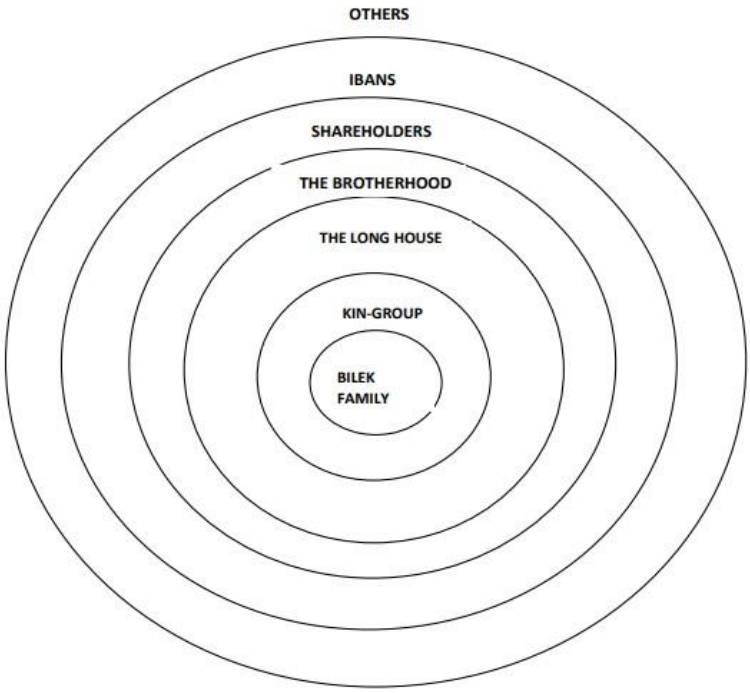

Figure 4.1: The Iban kin-groups. Source: (Sutlive Jr, 1991, p. 8)

The Iban community employs three key strategies for social control. First, children are raised with a strong emphasis on avoiding conflict, and significant efforts are made by most individuals to prevent disputes. Second, through storytelling and dramatisations, they are introduced to numerous spirits that oversee the adherence to many taboos. Some spirits aim to uphold peace, while others are associated with causing conflicts. This belief system helps to shift the ordinary tensions and conflicts of daily life, particularly in the communal living environment of the longhouse, onto the spirits. Third, the *tuai rumah* resolves internal disputes within the house, regional chiefs handle conflicts between different houses, and government officials intervene in disputes that cannot be resolved at the local level (Sutlive Jr, 1991, p. 9).

4.2.2 Insider research considerations

Jenny Fleming (2018) acknowledged that opinions vary on the extent to which an insider-researcher influences the research process; she then examined several elements of research, including the research questions, study design, data collection, ethical considerations, data analysis, and interpretation (pp. 312–316). She suggests that the formulation of research questions benefits from the researcher's existing knowledge, which can also inform the study design (Brannick and Coghla 2007 in Fleming 2008, p. 312). Leveraging their familiarity with the current scenario, insider-researchers frequently formulate research enquiries from a deep comprehension of the subject matter. Revealing such insights can pose a challenge to an outsider researcher (Fleming 2018, p. 313). Nevertheless, she emphasises that insider-researchers must be cautious about the impact of their bias, wherein their personal values and experiences influence the formulation of their study and take measures to mitigate potential bias throughout the various stages of the research process.

For my own research, I noted a need for caution when communicating in Iban. When translating my interview transcripts, for instance, I used common nouns to address my participants but noticed that my relationship with some participants needed a comparative adjective to indicate the relative degree of the relationship expressed in the Iban language. For example, one participant is my mother's elder sister; instead of addressing her as 'aunt', I called her *Indai tuai* or elder mother. Other participants were my mother's older and younger brothers; instead of addressing them as 'uncle', I called them *apai tuai*, (elder father) and *apai biak* (younger father).

The Iban noun for mother, *indai*, has several connotations. Sutlive and Sutlive (2001) explain the term *indai tuai* (old mother) as potentially equivalent to use of the term 'old lady' in English to refer to one's wife. In Iban kinship, *indai* applies to one's biological mother and stepmother as well as all women of the first-generation senior to the speaker. The predicate form *ngindai* shows an affectionate or respectful relationship in which a younger individual addresses a woman as 'mother' (Sutlive and Sutlive 2001, p. 798).

The excerpt below recounts another participant related to my mother via marriage asking how he should address me ahead of his interview.

Another participant who was related to my mother via marriage asked how he should be addressing me in the preliminary of his interview.

Excerpt 4.1: Gundi – request for permission to use my formal name

> G: Before I elaborate on our conversation, I want to thank you, may I call you Leela?
> L: Yes, you can also call me Lut.
> G: You have chosen me as one of your respondents and I feel honoured. I will try to tell you whatever I can.

Gundi asked for permission to call me Leela, because he was aware that he was one of my research respondents. I gave him the option of calling me by my Iban name, Lut, to signify familiarity. I thus share an identity, language, and experiential base with the study participants (Dwyer and Buckle 2009) and draw insights from my own lived experience (Brannick and Coghlan 2007). Among other advantages, insider status enables participants to accept a researcher more rapidly and completely (Dwyer and Buckle 2009). The personal disposition an insider brings to the field is itself the result of years of work experience in the setting under study. This disposition then shapes interactions with participants, the use of language, the knowledge obtained, and the interpretation and reporting of findings throughout the research process (Jankie 2004).

An insider's research has the deliberate intention of aligning one's self-interest with one's research (Jacobson and Mustafa 2019). This means objective research is neither possible nor desirable. Within the insider's paradigm, I instead utilised my advantage as a community member of the Indigenous group that I was researching and my experiences observing the *miring* rituals. I related to my research participants' identity, culture and language, and I had access to my community's family circles.

An insider-researcher would recognise a different understanding from the words or tone used in a conversation that might go unnoticed by an outsider. I have the advantage of the Iban language as my first language, which ensures a better understanding of the language overall.

Fleming (2018) states that, during interviews, researchers are commonly advised to maintain a neutral stance and avoid sharing personal experiences. But in insider research, participants often engage researchers as they would in casual conversations, leading researchers to share their own experiences. This fosters trust and rapport (Dwyer and Buckle 2009; Mercer 2007). Interview questions might touch on topics discussed in workplace chats. Hence, insider-researchers may begin interviews with a disclaimer, urging participants to respond as if discussing matters anew (Chavez 2008). Familiarity in interviews can result in fewer probing questions and unchallenged assumptions – or, conversely, richer questions owing to the

researcher's pre-understanding (Brannick and Coghlan 2008; Dwyer and Buckle 2009; Hellawell 2006).

As a researcher from within the Iban community, I am better positioned to navigate the complex kinship dynamics, social norms, and power structures with deeper insight and reflexivity. However, it is essential for me to critically reflect on my positionality, privilege, and potential biases. Engaging in ongoing dialogue and consultation with community members is crucial to ensure that our research practices uphold ethical standards and align with the needs and aspirations of the community (Mezirow,1981). By embracing this inclusive and participatory approach, I am convinced that kinship researchers can contribute to the co-creation of knowledge that is culturally meaningful, socially relevant, and empowering for the communities involved.

4.3 Data Collection: Interviews

Bloammaert and Dong Jie (2010), postulate that interviews are fundamentally structured conversations. While interviews are a specific type of conversation, they still retain the primary characteristics of dialogue. These conversations are structured around specific questions that the interviewer seeks to discuss (Bloammert and Dong Jie, 2010.p. 44).

Interviews have consistently provided researchers with a data-collection tool that adopts an interpretive approach. This tool implicitly views interpretation as a practice deeply rooted in social contexts, enabling researchers to gather information regarding the perceptions and expectations of various participants. Interviews are thus widely used to obtain qualitative data (Angelelli 2004; Inghilleri 2006 and 2012 in de Pedro 2017, p. 36). De Pedro (2017) acknowledges how the consequences of the interview design and delivery, its merits, and its shortcomings have been discussed by scholars drawing on different experiences – all of which are applicable for use within qualitative research. Interviews offer a researcher better insight of the phenomenon at hand from an emic perspective. They can help a researcher understand their interviewee's views as well as their feelings and hopes, going beyond fact to very much reflect the human experience (Guest, Namey, and Mitchell 2013, p. 116). Therefore, Bloammert and Dong Jie (2010) suggest not to anticipate your interviews to be flawless with no mistakes because, like other conversations, interviews are messy and complex (Bloammert and Dong Jie. 2010, p.45)

Charles Briggs (1986) discusses how his communicative errors during interviews with Spanish-speaking communities in northern New Mexico demonstrate the valuable need for understanding interview subjects' communicative contexts and cultural norms. He advocates those interviewers, particularly those working within their own communities, identify and adapt to the interviewees' communicative resources and cultural norms to avoid misinterpretations and enhance the quality of their research findings (Briggs, 1986, pp. 56–57).

As an insider and kinship researcher, I am well-versed in the Iban language and cultural background. Even so, I must be careful and consider Briggs's insights about the importance of developing interviewing methodologies that are culturally and communicatively compatible with the subjects being studied (Briggs, 1986, pp. 56-57). This cultural compatibility ensures that my "conversations" with my participants are more ready to share their narratives.
Insider-researchers must be mindful of the impacts of their role on interviews, minimising bias through proper preparation. As research is scrutinised, establishing 'trustworthiness' (akin to validity, reliability, and objectivity) is crucial (Creswell 2013). Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that internal validity should be replaced by credibility, reliability by dependability, and external validity by transferability. Insider designs can enhance credibility through extended engagement and observation. Dependability requires logical, traceable, and documented research processes that can be achieved by acknowledging the researcher's insider position (Patton 1990). Still, ethical issues related to privacy and confidentiality arise. Finally, transferability involves applying findings to different contexts; this can be bolstered by presenting detailed data that allows readers to draw their own interpretations (Patton 1990). These concepts are relevant to qualitative research in general. Participants might withhold information owing to fear of judgement or repercussions to the relationship (Chavez 2008; Mercer 2007).

The interview is also the best medium to elicit prominent biographical background within context, including participant understandings, experiences, social practices, identities, and their imaginings of the future, despite arguments that question such assumptions (de' Marais 2004; Freeman 2006; Patton 2002; Sartwell 2006; and Seidman 2011). Interviews gave my research participants opportunities to share their stories (Patton 2002) and this, in turn, provided real data that was naturally occurring and had real effects on the world, reflecting cultural perspectives (Silverman 1985; 2001, p. 152). Therefore, the interview data I collected from my participants enabled the examination of their cultural perspectives towards *miring* practices.

In my study, I employed what is known as *semi-structured interviews*. These involve a balance between focused attention to the goal of the interview while allowing the researcher autonomy to explore ideas as they arise within the interview (McGrath, Palmgren, Liljedahl, (2019). Semi-structured interviews are "the preferred data collection method when the researcher's goal is to better understand the participant's unique perspective rather than a generalised understanding of a phenomenon" (Adeoye and Olenik, 2021, p. 1360). For his study, de Pedro (2017) departed from a clear-cut methodological approach and adopted what he calls a hybrid interview approach. He employed the hybrid interview method for six Peruvian Indigenous leaders, gathering insights into how they constructed meaning from their experiences of exchanges that unfolded between themselves and the state. These exchanges were mediated by language and culture, which underpinned de Pedro's methodological choices. He opted for open-ended interview questions arranged similarly to a structured interview. However, he also allowed for the possibility of seeking an explanation or prompting a follow-up question to the responses of interviewees (de Pedro 2017, p. 37).

Social researchers have been collecting data online for many years. There are numerous examples of the use of online survey tools or of content analyses or ethnographies of existing online interactions as research materials. In terms of qualitative data collection, Interviews have been conducted by telephone or Skype for some considerable time (source). Conducting interviews online to avoid in-person interaction (or because of mitigating circumstances such as the case in my study) can achieve similar ends, with interviewing possible through mobile phones or laptops using tools such as Skype (Janghorban et al. 2014; Barrat and Maddox 2016). This means that interviews can include audiovisual interactions. Online interviews also offer a 'real-time' interview in a conversational format, but on a different platform. Setting up these online interviews involves detailed planning, coordination, and the selection of a convenient interview platform.

Seidman (1998) suggests several strategies for conducting interviews, recommending that the interviewer listen on three different levels during the interview: first to the words of the participant; then to the inner voice of what the participant is communicating; and finally, to the overall process of the interview. Seidman also suggested that an interviewer should be prepared with interview guides and have follow-up questions ready throughout the process. The interviewer recommended making sure that participants are comfortable throughout the interview process and respecting participant boundaries. For my study, I recorded each

interview session, with participant consent, to help with the later process of transcription but also to enable the reflection described by Seidman. I also had prepared guides for the interview, that consisted of the interview questions, interview protocols, and space for notes so that I could record areas to follow up after these had been asked.

Interviews allowed a closer relationship in providing confidence and understanding between an interviewer and interviewee (Agar 2008), and this often led the participant into sharing more insights about themselves (Seidman 1989). Even though I was an insider-researcher, I gathered a deeper understanding of my participants from their narratives and how it made sense to them. This also allowed my participants to express themselves. Weiss (1994) warns that the downside of this would be disappointment from the participant if the interview relationship is not maintained (Weiss 1994, p. 123). The participants of my study may be closely related to myself, and I had to maintain my researcher's professionalism and my community responsibilities by keeping their private information confidential (Weiss 1994, p. 123). Therefore, for my study, I reminded my participants of my interview protocols and provided them with a summary of the research.

4.3.1 Conducting the interviews

In the leadup to conducting the interviews, I first prepared an outline of a protocol that would introduce myself and my research, inform the participant about their rights, and reconfirm their consent to participate in the interview. I began the interview session by asking relevant background questions: age, education, designation, and religious beliefs. Finally, I proceeded with semi-structured questions based on my research questions. The wording of the questions was carefully considered in both English and Iban to ensure readiness for retrospective think-aloud protocols.

Second, I determined the best possible interview platform for my participants. I considered several options, including Microsoft Teams and Streams.

I had to consider the digital literacy of my participants and their access to the online interviews. To mine valuable data for my research, the ideal participants would be senior citizens who were familiar with the old religion and recognise changes over time that may have impacted traditional rituals. While the interview itself was not an issue, my participants had problems navigating the online platforms facilitating the occasion. Despite verbally agreeing to

participate, all of the above 60-year-old intended participants struggled to manage Microsoft Teams, Zoom, or Skype. In terms of access, *rumah panjai*, or longhouse dwelling participants, had additional problems with internet connection.

I thus began the first interview session with Radin, a state civil servant who has a good grasp of digital technology.

Interview data

Radin hails from Rantau Sukat, Roban, and happens to be my second cousin on my maternal side. This familial connection facilitated seamless access to him, and he graciously accommodated the interview on a Saturday evening to avoid disrupting his work schedule. Initiating the interview, I adhered to my research ethics protocol, ensuring transparency and respect for Radin's preferences. With his consent secured, I commenced recording the session. Conducted via Microsoft Teams, the interview spanned a duration of 52 minutes and 12 seconds. Delivered in a semi-structured format, I employed a predetermined set of questions as a guide, allowing for organic conversation while maintaining focus on key research areas. The subsequent transcription was carried out manually to ensure accuracy and fidelity to the interview content.

A semi-structured approach offers flexibility to interviewees, enabling them to share their narratives authentically. As Bryman (2016) notes, this method allows for nuanced responses that can deviate from the pre-set questions, enriching the data-collection process. Echoing Patton (2002) and Silverman (1985; 2001), interviews serve as invaluable sources for naturally occurring data, providing insights that resonate with real-world implications.

Excerpt 4.2 Radin– characterisation of *miring* practices

> R: the blood offering is similar to the ones in the Old Testament
> L: Yes
> R: Our offering is similar to that. For example, the people of Judah, sacrifice animals, they slaughter the animal, and its blood is part of their offering. Partly to also mark Moses,
> L: Yes
> R: It's almost similar, I am not trying to say that the practice is exactly the same, but their ways of execution is almost similar.
> L: Yes
> R: …because you asked the meaning of the offering.

An illustrative example of this richness emerged during the interview when Radin elaborated on his understanding of *miring*, drawing parallels between Iban blood offerings and those depicted in the Old Testament. This spontaneous expansion exemplifies the depth of insight attainable through semi-structured questioning, underscoring the potency of qualitative inquiry in capturing multifaceted perspectives. As Copland and Creese (2015) remark;

> Answers to research questions that might have traditionally emerged through observation may not do so in this kind of research, making formal interviews valuable data sources. Furthermore, opportunities for informal interviewing may also be limited; researchers often have to rush off to their next site or back to their institutions and not have time to chat to participants at their leisure. (p. 30)

My experience with interview sessions certainly resonates with Copland and Creese's (2015) opinion on the importance of formal interviewing to elicit data that responds to research questions, (p. 30). My interview with the participant elicited his opinion on the new religion versus the old religion, and how he 'manages' his inner conflict.

Excerpt 4.3 Radin – description of his faith

> L: So, now brother Radin, you have mentioned that every time you receive dreams, you will perform the *miring*. What about your Christian belief? Does it overlap or interfere with your *miring* beliefs?
>
> R: mmm, I believe in Jesus. OK, this is the way I look at it. My perspective might differ from the others.

The excerpt from Radin's interview further highlights the importance of formal interviews in capturing data that might not emerge through traditional observation methods. His statement underscores the significance of conducting structured interviews to glean insights into participant beliefs and practices, especially when time constraints or logistical challenges limit opportunities for informal conversations. Radin's response indicates that his Christian beliefs coexist with his *miring* practices, suggesting a complex interplay between religious faith and cultural traditions. This underscores the need to engage participants in structured interviews in order to explore the nuances of such intersections.

Figure 4.2: The interview online platform; Microsoft streams

I conducted their interviews with a semi-structured guide and these sessions developed into conversations as each progressed. The interviews were conducted through Microsoft Teams, then transcribed and translated manually. Background information plays a pivotal role in research, facilitating both analytical depth and ethical integrity. By delving into participant backgrounds, researchers can uncover patterns and trends within specific demographic groups, leading to a more nuanced analysis and interpretation of research findings. My study identified two *temenggong* (community leader), one ex *penghulu* (community leader), two retired civil servants, one active civil servant, five *lemambang*, and six *manang* (five participants are both *lemambang* and *manang*).

This approach ensures the relevance and applicability of research outcomes across a diverse set of participants. Moreover, understanding participant backgrounds is essential for addressing ethical considerations in research practices. Such knowledge enables researchers to ensure informed consent, protect confidentiality, and minimise potential harm, thus upholding ethical standards and fostering trust between researchers and participants. By integrating background information into the research process, scholars can enhance the quality, integrity, and relevance of their findings while promoting ethical conduct and inclusivity in research endeavours. I used this to provide participant biographies in a later part of this chapter; I also anonymised all participants in the study.

Table 4.1: Overview of interviews

Participant	Date of Interview	Platform	Length	Language
Radin	060221	Microsoft Stream	52:12	Iban with some words in English
Lindong	230221	Microsoft Stream	26:01	Iban with attempts in English
Gundi	180321	Microsoft Stream	1:11:14	English
Daud	270421	Microsoft Stream	1:23:48	Iban
Chendan	270421	Microsoft Stream		Iban
Belayong	020821	Microsoft Stream	1:05:17	Iban
Tajek	120621	Microsoft Stream	16:45	Iban
Lambat	300621	Microsoft Stream	14:59	Iban
Cherang	160221	Microsoft Stream and WhatsApp video call	1:47:55	Iban
Total			7:18:11	

4.3.2 Digital anxiety

Seven participants suffered from digital anxiety wherein they were nervous and unsure of how to manage Microsoft Teams or about seeing themselves reflected on the video screen. For instance, Gundi agreed to an online interview session but was unsure about navigating the online platform. He wanted to wait for one of his children to visit and help manage the online platform, but Covid-19 restriction made it difficult for them to help. His session only materialised after Lindong, who lives nearby, took Gundi to his own house and used his laptop to organise the interview.

Another participant, Daud, a community leader and the oldest participant, postponed his interview sessions at least three times because he was unsure about participating online. He brought in Chendan, another community leader, to replace him because he still wanted to contribute to my study, by providing a replacement for himself. When he saw that Chendan was at ease in front of the laptop, he decided that he would like to be interviewed first and hoped that Chendan would add on later in his session, to whatever he might not have remembered to share about the *miring*. The two were thus interviewed on the same day, one after the other.

4.3.3 Time zone differences

The time difference between Malaysia and the UK is seven hours and one interview session was conducted at 3:00 a.m. UK time/10:00 a.m. Malaysian time. Interviewing so early in morning, at 3:00 a.m., complicated my preparation and it was not an easy session for me. The early morning timing necessitated adjustments in the researcher's schedule that potentially led to fatigue and reduced cognitive function, thus affecting the quality of interaction and data collection. In addition, disparity in the local time of participants can introduce variability in their readiness and availability, potentially influencing their responsiveness and engagement during the interview. As such, future research should prioritise establishing mutually convenient time slots that accommodate the different geographic locations of participants and optimising the quality of data collection.

4.3.4 Interruptions

Excerpt 4.3: Cherang – example of prompting by his son

C: Have you ever been to school, elder father?
A*: Did you go to school?
C: Yes.
L: What year?
A*: After the Japanese occupation
C: After the Japanese occupation.
*his son in the background.

There were several interruptions during my interview sessions. One was when Cherang's son, who was handling his online platform, decided to 'help' Cherang with a few answers to his interview. The occurrence of Cherang's son helping his father during the online interview introduces methodological implications that necessitate careful consideration. Although well-intentioned, the son's interjections carry the potential to influence participant responses and introduce bias into the data-collection process. Furthermore, the presence of an additional individual in the interview setting can disrupt the flow of conversation and compromise the researcher's ability to maintain control over the interview dynamics.

As such, researchers must be vigilant in assessing the impact of third-party involvement on the quality and reliability of the data collected. Strategies to mitigate this influence could include clarifying participant roles and expectations as well as implementing measures to minimise distractions and maintain the integrity of the research process. By addressing these methodological challenges, researchers can ensure the validity and credibility of their findings.

Excerpt 4.5: Chendan – acknowledgement of background noise

C: Your child is crying again.
L: It's okay, he will settle

In the above (Excerpt 4.5), my child was crying in the background of an interview. The interruption sheds light on a common challenge faced by researchers when conducting online interviews: interruptions from their immediate environment. Such interruptions can have notable effects on the interview methodology. First, interruptions disrupt the flow of the

interview, potentially causing the researcher to lose focus or the participant to become distracted. In this scenario, the researcher's attention can momentarily shift from the interview, affecting their ability to effectively listen to and engage with the participant's responses.

Second, interruptions such as a crying child can impact the rapport and atmosphere of the interview. The researcher's efforts to reassure the participant and manage the interruption may momentarily distract attention away from the interview topic, potentially disrupting the natural rhythm of the conversation and hinder establishment of rapport. From a methodological standpoint, interruptions introduce variability and unpredictability into the research process. Researchers must consider the potential influence of interruptions on the data collected during the interview. For instance, the researcher may miss or misinterpret certain responses owing to the distraction caused by the interruption, leading to gaps or inaccuracies in the data.

4.3.5 A deaf participant

When interviewing Lambat, I tried to explain my ethical procedures, but he began promptly sharing his experiences with *miring* and invoking the gods and started chanting. After trying to ask a few questions after the chant, I kept repeating myself and it was only then that I realised that he was deaf. He understood that I was interested in *miring* because Tajek had sought his help to explain and share his insights as was the only person practising the old religion left in their longhouse. After invoking the gods during the online session, he immediately apologised for his deafness and offered to meet me face-to-face one day so he could share more of his knowledge about *miring*.

The unexpected revelation of a participant's deafness post-interview prompted me to reflect on the methodological implications, especially regarding communication accessibility and rapport building. While the participant's deafness was not initially apparent, future research endeavours will integrate pre-emptive measures to accommodate different communication needs, including the provision of accessible platforms and alternative communication channels. This retrospective consideration underscores the importance of sensitivity to the different backgrounds and needs of participants, ensuring inclusivity and ethical engagement throughout the research process. Despite the unforeseen challenge, efforts were made to glean insights from the interview data given the unique perspective and experiences brought forth by the participant.

4.3.6 A change of the way in responding from pilot study

Excerpt 4.5: Tajek – example of uncertainty in response

> L: Your name? Can you tell me your name elder mother?
> T: No, I'm not keen to say my name. why not you say it out for me? You know my name. Just like before (pilot study) you said my name for me, Can it be like before?
> L: Yes. of course. Then the year of your birth It's okay, I will just call you my elder mother and not use your real name.
> T: Yes, just like our interview last year.

In another occurrence, Tajek, the only female participant, was very shy about seeing and hearing herself during her interview session. She insisted that I should know her name, age, and limited formal education. But during my pilot study in June 2019, she was very calm and collected during our face-to-face interview. She was the only female participant to participate in my study because of her ease of familiarity.

4.4 Participant recruitment

My initial recruitment of study participants was based on those I met during the pilot stage of my study. At the time, I had identified a group of several participants consisting of an equal ratio in terms of gender, age, and varying religious beliefs. I asked for verbal consent and planned for an extensive version of ethnographic study of *miring*. But as part of my Covid-19 mitigation plan, this aim had to change. For instance, one *tuai rumah* (longhouse headman) from my pilot study who had consented to participate in my main study passed on during the period, and I lost communication with several others owing to digital access constraints.

4.4.1 Snowball sampling

After taking into account considerations such as internet access and Covid-19 restrictions, I decided to employ snowball sampling in which a current participant was asked to introduce another potential participant who could contribute to the research (Goodman 1961). As a criterion, I sought interviewees with internet access. On 6 February 2021, for instance, I began the data-collection process by interviewing Radin; at the end of the session, I asked him to suggest any suitable research participants who could provide insights into my research questions. He suggested several names, including Belayong. My maternal uncle, Lindong,

suggested Gundi, Daud, and Chendan. Finally, Tajek, the only person practising the old religion in her longhouse, suggested Lambat to share his expertise on *miring* rituals.

Table 4.2: Biographical information on participants

Interview date	Participant	Ritual involvement	Age/ Gender	Occupation	Religious belief(s)
6 February 2021	Radin	novice *manang*	50/male	Sarawak Forestry Officer	Anglican/old religion
15 February 2021	Lindong	ex-ritual participant	64/male	Retired science teacher	Catholic
18 March 2021	Gundi	ex-ritual participant	male	Retired school principal	Anglican
27 April 2021	Daud	*Lemambang*	male	Community leader	Anglican/old religion
27 April 2021	Chendan	*Lemambang*	male	Community leader	Anglican/old religion
12 June 2021	Tajek	ex-ritual participant	female	Farmer	Anglican
30 June 2021	Lambat	*Lemambang, manang*	male	Bard	Old religion
02 August 2021	Belayong	*Lemambang, manang*	male	Civil servant/bard	Old religion
16 September 2021	Cherang	*Lemambang manang*	male	Retired community leader/bard*	Old religion/ Anglican

Participants' biographies

Radin

The first interview for this study is Radin, age 50, an Iban from Rantau Sukat, Roban, a longhouse in the Krian River network. He is my second cousin on my maternal side. This connection provided ease of access, and he only requested that the interview take place a Saturday evening so it would not inconvenience his workdays. He grew up in the longhouse but left home to start his education and was introduced to Christianity in school. He reconnected with the *miring* practice after his own traditional Iban wedding. He is presently performing *miring* in the city and still learning the trade from Belayong, the youngest participant of my study.

Radin acknowledged that the longhouse is the best place to learn about *miring*. He showed an early interest in *miring* ceremonies and had observed the elders in his longhouse perform the ceremony as a child. He noticed that once he grew up and left the longhouse for his education, he also lost the convenience of access to the *miring* ceremonies often held in his longhouse. He had to leave his rural surroundings to pursue his education in an urban area, Kuching.

Lindong

Lindong, age 64, is an Iban from Bratong Atas, Roban. He is my mother's youngest sibling and initially recruited to provide a digital platform for my interviewees in my own longhouse in Roban. However, he volunteered to become a participant after two others failed to manage Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or Skype. They were dependent on their children to handle these Internet-based mediums, and the Sarawak inter-district lockdowns prevented Lindong and the other participants' children from helping them with the matter at that time. Most older participants in rural areas remain at the longhouse while their children work in a nearby city or district. Lindong's interview session was 26:01 minutes in length. He insisted on speaking English even though I invited him to communicate in Iban.

Gundi

Gundi, a resident of Babang in the Saratok district, describes himself as a *warga mas (*or veteran*)*, indicating his status as a senior citizen within the community. At 76 years old, he reflects on his educational journey by acknowledging limited opportunities for further study during his youth. Despite this, he obtained a diploma in Teaching English as a Second Language and pursued studies in Applied Linguistics. Gundi initially embarked on a career as

a teacher, obtaining his highest qualification, Senior Cambridge, which was deemed sufficient at the time. But as time progressed, he sought to enhance his qualifications, eventually becoming eligible to serve as a state education officer after completing the STPM examination. Despite aspirations for university education, familial responsibilities prompted him to prioritise supporting his family. Throughout his professional career, Gundi served the Education Department in various roles, whether as teacher, headmaster, or principal. His career spanned over 33 years until his retirement at age 55. Following retirement, he transitioned to working with the Tun Jugah Foundation where he remains actively engaged.

Daud

Daud is an Iban *Temenggong*, a state-appointed community leader in charge of the Iban longhouses on a specific river. He is also a *lemambang* or bardic priest, and these two positions make him one of the key persons of note in an Iban community. As a *Temenggong*, Daud is in position to discuss Iban matters to the state government and vice versa. And as a *lemambang*, he is the person who can communicate with the gods through dreams, signs, and auguries. Daud thus holds the qualifications to become a complete Iban leader – one that deals with both living authorities and the spirit world.

Chendan

Excerpt 4.7: Chendan – self-introduction

> I am 66 years old, almost as old as Agan. I am also old. My education background was until Form 5, secondary school and I sat for my Senior Cambridge in 1972. I passed the exam. I have never worked as a civil servant. I work in the longhouse. I was the Matup longhouse *tuai rumah* (headman) for 4 years replacing a deceased predecessor. After that I became a Penghulu (supervising headmen from several longhouse) for another 4 years. I was responsible for 22 longhouses in Ulu Paku. Then, I was promoted a *Temenggong* (community leader) on the 1st of January 2019. My jurisdiction as a Temenggong includes your area, Saratok and Roban.Therefore, my current designation is a *Temenggong* for the district of Betong. I have known Daud since childhood and it was way before the both of us became community leaders. I can call myself a bard, yes. I said so because I am a person of reference and I am always invited to perform the *miring* whenever there is a *Gawai antu* or Significant ritual for the dead. I am called to invoke the gods and ancestors and I have my own 'bard circle'. Therefore, I am confident that I am a *lemambang*. In 2019, I was called to perform *miring* during *Gawai antu* in Padeh. I also perform *miring* for

> our neighbouring longhouses and once by the longhouse of our former minister Datu' Patinggi Jabu.

Chendan, age 66, reflects on his extensive experience and leadership roles within the community. His narrative underscores his deep roots in the community, extensive leadership experience, and enduring connections with fellow community leaders.

Chendan identifies himself as a bard, emphasising his role as a respected figure within the community who is frequently called on to perform the *miring* ritual during significant occasions such as *Gawai antu*, the ritual for the dead. His expertise lies in invoking the gods and ancestors, a responsibility he fulfils with confidence and reverence. Chendan mentions his bard circle, suggesting a network or community of fellow practitioners who share his expertise and knowledge. His status as a *lemambang*, or invocation chant expert, is reaffirmed by regular invitations to perform *miring* ceremonies on notable occasions, such as the *Gawai antu* in Padeh and various ceremonies in neighbouring longhouses as well as at the longhouse of former minister Datu' Patinggi Jabu. His own introduction highlights Chendan's esteemed position as a custodian of tradition and spirituality within the community, underscoring his proficiency in performing sacred rituals and invoking ancestral spirits.

Tajek

Tajek is 74 years old. She is my mother's eldest sister and according to Iban courtesy, I must refer to her as an older mother. Older mother was married off at 14 years of age and moved from the Bratong longhouse (my longhouse) to be with her husband in a more rural longhouse in the mountains. Older mother was also one of my interviewees for my pilot study in June 2019. Her responses contributed significantly to my pilot report, and I was hoping that she would offer me more insights for my main study. Tajek acknowledges that an Iban man is the person supposed to be leading a *miring* ceremony. She acknowledges that Iban women usually prepare the food offerings for *miring*. This also means she has played the role of preparing food offerings for *miring* ceremonies before.

Tajek demonstrates an understanding of omens and their relation to the gods. She believes these omens are spiritual signs, demonstrating her understanding of the animal environment and the

tidings it carries in relation to farming. She acknowledges that *miring* is performed in response to these omens and believes that the invoked deities help protect the crops.

Lambat

Lemambang Lambat is one of the very few who chose to practise the Iban religion and the only one left from his own longhouse, Kup, Ibus. Aside from being a *lemambang*, he is also a *manang* or shaman. The Iban bard and shaman have different functions and few Ibans can perform both roles as *Lemambang* Lambat does. He is the third generation in his family line to assume both roles, after his grandfather, *Lemambang* Libu, and his father, *Lemamban*g Jampi.

A *lemambang* is also recognised by his *tungkat* or staff, and *lupung* or shaman's satchel. When he was 18 years old, *Lemambang* Lambat received his ancestors in a dream and was 'cursed' by the spirits to become a bard. After that, he was anointed a bard in the 1960s and acquired his bardic staff. His role as a *manang* or shaman came years after his role as a *lemambang*. According to Lambat, he had received a dream in which the spirits called him to serve as a *manang* and inherit his father's *lupung*. To this day, he is serving in both roles.

Belayong

Excerpt 4.8: Belayong – self-introduction

> I have always been interested in the Iban way of practising culture and religion. I started learning about our Iban practices since I was in primary 4, (10 years old). The first thing that I learned about is how to chant. I learn to chant the mantras and soon after I learn to *betusut*, or explain genealogy. Next, I learn to *Beburung* or interpret dreams. Then I learn to invoke the gods. From form 4 to form 5 (16 to 17 years old), I learn the Iban idioms and metaphors. So, all these are very beneficial customary practices, especially during weddings in the longhouse, sometimes Iban weddings in hotels. The longhouse people always seek for my assistance to officiate Iban weddings. And, I always officiate Iban weddings in hotels too. I have been to many places in Sarawak, to Kuching, Miri, and many other longhouses. My main role is to uphold the old practices. That is also my belief. There are so many beliefs in the new world and mine is the old Iban beliefs.

At age 28, Belayong is the youngest interview participant in my study. He showed interest in the practice from a very young age. He is descended from a long line of bardic priests and shamans. His longhouse upbringing probably also helped to nurture his early interest in the

Iban religion, which saw him learn the chants and gradually grow interested in learning complex rituals. His involvement in the practice gradually shifted from that of an observer to a participant, active participant, and then learner–bard. As he spends more time experiencing the religion, his level of involvement in the old practice also grows.

Overall, Belayong portrays himself as a dedicated custodian of Iban traditions committed to preserving and perpetuating the cultural heritage of his community.

Cherang

Cherang is the oldest living member of the Bratong longhouse. He is my mother's eldest surviving brother, and I addressed him as *Apai tuai* or elder father. He is over 80 years old, but his identification card states his birth year as 1942 – the year the Japanese occupied Sarawak. Despite the formal documentation, he remembered attending a Japanese governed school in St Paul, Roban, for a while and he learned to write and speak Japanese for some time during his primary years. Cherang is an ironsmith in the longhouse; the Malaysian national television station (RTM) featured him in their series on maintaining cultures and traditions in 2017.

Cherang has led many Iban rituals within and outside the longhouse. Prominent people often seek him for his *miring* services. However, he calls himself neither a *lemambang* nor *manang*. When asked why he refused to be known as any of these, he simply expressed his indifference and said he did not feel deserving of such divine accolade. My experience with Cherang during the pilot study was very different from the online interview. Cherang needed more probing during the online interview session and sometimes his son repeated my questions from behind the video recording.

During our face-to-face interview in the pilot stage, Cherang shared his experiences and knowledge about *miring*. For my main study and our online interview session, Cherang specially requested to describe his experiences witnessing the *kelam ai*, which is literally translated as going under water or trial by water, and *nampok*, a significant healing ritual. Cherang is a retired Iban *penghulu* or community leader in charge of several longhouses. Cherang is the only participant who decided to narrate events that constitute a *miring* practice. He narrated a trial by water that he witnessed as a young man. *Miring* was central to the event, but trial by water was banned by the British administration in the 1930s.

4.5 Data Analysis

Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 78) consider thematic analysis as the 'starting point for qualitative research' and a crucial training ground for basic skills necessary for many classes of qualitative analysis. Braun and Clark (2006, 2022) describe thematic analysis as an organised method for discovering and analysing patterns from a dataset and developing themes through organised steps of data coding (Braun and Clark, 2006, 2022, p.4). It effectively produces rich and complex data accounts (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 83). As a common language, thematic analysis facilitates a meaningful dialogue between researchers using qualitative and quantitative methods. As Boyatzis (1998, p. 5) aptly put it, it 'helps translate' so that 'researchers using qualitative, quantitative, or both research methods … can speak the same language'.

The process of thematic analysis, as described by DeSantis and Noel Ugarriza (2000, p. 362), involves a 'case-conscious exploration of the data '. This method entails a close and thorough examination of data for patterns, which emerge through iterative reflection and a researcher's vision. The result is 'detailed, nuanced descriptions of the content' of the data (Braun and Clarke 2006, p. 85), a testament to the depth and richness that thematic analysis can bring to research.

During this phase of study, I began to piece together the big picture for the data I had collected. I prepared an initial list of ideas about what I had observed in my interview data and various elements of interest. Then, I began to produce initial codes. Initial codes are ‘the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon’ (Boyatzis 1998 in Braun and Clarke 2006, p. 88). I tried to search for codes that made sense for my research questions and coded the data according to my interview transcripts. Although coding is part of the analysis, the coded data differ from the themes, which are often broader and were developed in the next phase (Braun and Clarke 2006, p. 88).

4.5.1 Generating initial codes

In this phase, I began to observe the big picture when it came to the collected data. I generated an initial list of ideas about what I observed in my data and what was interesting about them. Then, I began to produce initial codes. These are ‘the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon’ (Boyatzis 1998 in Braun and Clarke 2006, p. 88).

The initial stages of coding data involve generating multiple codes (Charmaz 2006). At this stage, I simply listed all the ideas emerging from the text, identifying keywords and framing a general concept before arriving at my themes. As I aimed to explain the social cultural realities of the Ibans, I began by organising my raw data into themes in a process detailed below.

Phase 1: Familiarising myself with the data

During this phase, I meticulously transcribed and translated interview data from Iban to English, prioritising accuracy and fidelity to the original content. Detailed notes from each interview session coupled with observation of interview etiquette facilitated a comprehensive understanding of contextual nuances. Extensive listening sessions beforehand familiarised me with each participant's voice, enabling a nuanced interpretation of their responses. Rough notes written concurrently in both Iban and English captured noteworthy points and reflections. Despite being time-consuming, the transcription process was instrumental in elucidating the intricacies of the collected data, enabling thorough analysis and interpretation.

Given the importance of accurate translation, I chose to undertake the task myself, recognising its challenges and time-intensive nature. As both an Iban and an English speaker, I aimed to ensure translation accuracy. To faithfully represent the original content, it is crucial to outline my approach to translation. The process involved meticulous attention to detail, with a focus on conveying intended meaning effectively while preserving cultural nuances inherent in the Iban language. To achieve this, I engaged an Iban linguist with a TESL background from the Tun Jugah Foundation in Sarawak, who was proficient in both Iban and English. We collaborated closely to ensure consistency in terminology and clarity of expression throughout the translation process. Multiple rounds of review and revision were conducted to refine the translated text and address any discrepancies or ambiguities. Emphasis was placed on maintaining the integrity of the original message while ensuring readability and coherence in the target language. By adhering to rigorous translation standards and employing a collaborative approach, the translation from Iban to English aimed to capture the essence of the original content as accurately as possible and facilitate cross-cultural understanding.

This was followed by immersing myself in the data, as I revisited translated transcriptions and contemplated salient issues related to the research question. Preliminary thoughts on potential codes emerged during this phase, laying the groundwork for subsequent analysis. The idea of

noting initial thoughts and interpretations like this, recommended in this (Tuckett, 2005) as one way for researchers to continue to become familiar with the data in both depth and breadth (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

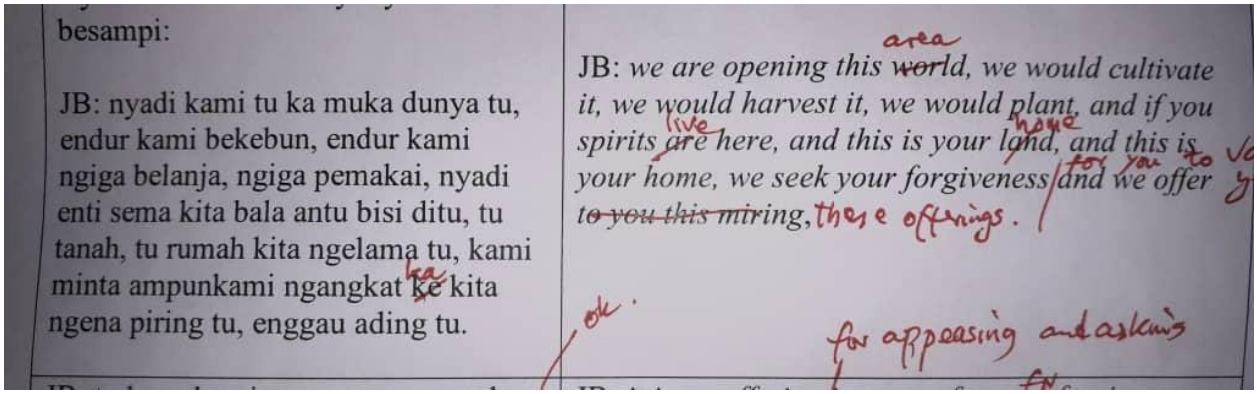

Figure 4.3: Proofreading sample

In figure 4.3 above, my proofreader made revisions that I embraced to ensure the accuracy of the intended meanings of interviewees. When an interviewee employed the Iban term *dunya*, for instance, I initially translated it literally as 'world'. But on review, my proofreader suggested that the intended meaning was better captured by the term 'area'. I agreed with this adjustment after reconsidering the context provided by the participant, particularly regarding the mention of 'cultivating a land'.

Phase 2: Generating initial codes

In this phase, I began to observe the larger picture of the collected data. I prepared an initial list of ideas about what I observed in my data and interesting elements. Then, I began to produce initial codes – 'the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon' (Boyatzis 1998 in Braun and Clarke 2006, p. 88). I also attempted to search for codes that made sense for my research questions and coded data based on my field notes, interview transcripts, videos, and photographs. Although coding is part of the analysis, the coded data differ from the themes, which are often broader and developed in the next phase (Braun and Clarke 2006, p. 88).

Data extract	Coded for
1. Belayong: So, not only on *miring*, I have also learned about the chants for *bengap*, or small healing ritual, *nimang jalong*, or significant trophy head rituals. There are several types of *biau*, or chants. The *biau* for visitors. The *biau* for husband and wife. Well, the *biau* depends on individual needs. 2. Chendan: The trophy heads were unsmoked and they are hanging next door. My mother's brother has 28 trophy heads. The other heaps of trophy heads are also in the longhouse common gallery. The *miring* must be performed for these heads, especially during *Gawai*. These trophy heads never requested for food but food offering must be given to them during *Gawai*. 3. Lambat: We call first for Semerugah because he is the eldest child of King Durung. And, being the eldest, Semerugah is to take charge of the land and soil. Singalang Burung is to bring trophy heads (god of war). The next brother is Sempulang Gana, who is brings foods and fruits. Apai Aloi, another sibling inherited the *lupung* or the shamanic satchel and is in charge of healings. Their brother Ribai left to go across the seas.	1. talked *sampi* or chants 2. talked about trophy heads 3. talked about gods and ancestors

Figure 4.4: Sample interview coding

Coding marks the phase at which a researcher systematically analyses the relevance of the data for their research questions and the phenomenon under investigation (Braun and Clarke 2013). This step is pivotal as it sets the groundwork for identifying the patterns, themes, and categories that will shape the findings of the thematic analysis. I made sure to continuously refer to my research questions on my sticky notes to help navigate through this process.

In Figure 4.4 above, identifying words such as '*sampi'*, 'trophy heads', 'gods', and 'ancestors' helps with generating initial codes for thematic analysis by providing clear indicators of significant concepts or themes within the data. For instance, *sampi* refers to a significant ritual or invocation, suggesting a category related to ritual practices. 'Trophy heads' indicate a specific cultural practice or belief system, potentially leading to codes related to ceremonial practices or ancestral reverence. Mentions of 'gods' and 'ancestors' point to spiritual or supernatural elements, indicating themes related to belief systems or cosmology.

In the interview excerpt from Belayong above, various terms such as 'chants for *bengap*', '*nimang jalong*', '*biau*', 'Semerugah', 'Singalang Burung', 'Sempulang Gana', 'Apai Aloi', and 'Ribai' offer rich insights into different aspects of Iban culture and belief systems. These terms can serve as initial codes for thematic analysis. For example, 'chants for *bengap*' and '*nimang jalon*g' suggest rituals or ceremonial practices related to healing or spiritual wellbeing. The mention of trophy heads and their significance during *Gawai* highlights the importance of ancestral reverence and ritual practices in Iban culture. In addition, references to Semerugah, Singalang Burung, Sempulang Gana, Apai Aloi, and Ribai all provide insights into Iban cosmology and spiritual hierarchy that can be further explored through thematic analysis.

Overall, identifying key words and concepts in interviews helps in generating initial codes for thematic analysis by highlighting important themes, beliefs, and cultural practices relevant to the research questions and objectives.

Phase 3: Searching for themes

This phase includes organising and grouping all the potentially relevant coded data segments into prominent themes (Braun and Clark, 2006). After all the data had been coded, I had a list of different codes that I attempted to group into an overarching theme. I used colour coding to organise my different codes into themes. I tried placing them into theme piles and attempted my first thematic map during this phase. I started thinking about the relationship between codes, placing any codes that seem not to belong anywhere under miscellaneous.

The initial process of organising my data was to transcribe my interview data. Eight out of nine participants had communicated in Iban, and the automated transcription panel in Microsoft Stream was only helpful with the timing of the interview. This timing had helped in the transcription process, and I had to listen to and manually transcribe my interview data utilising the transcript panel. I did so first by deleting the automated English transcriptions from

Microsoft Stream and replacing them with my own Iban transcription. This process took long hours and had to be repeated several times.

Then, I transferred the Microsoft Stream data to Microsoft Word files and started the process of translating all the interview transcripts from Iban to English. After that, I started organising the Microsoft Word transcripts by applying colour codes to themes in line with my research questions. After several attempts at colour coding across interview transcripts, it became clearer to me that the transcripts were substantially different and had several emerging themes of their own.

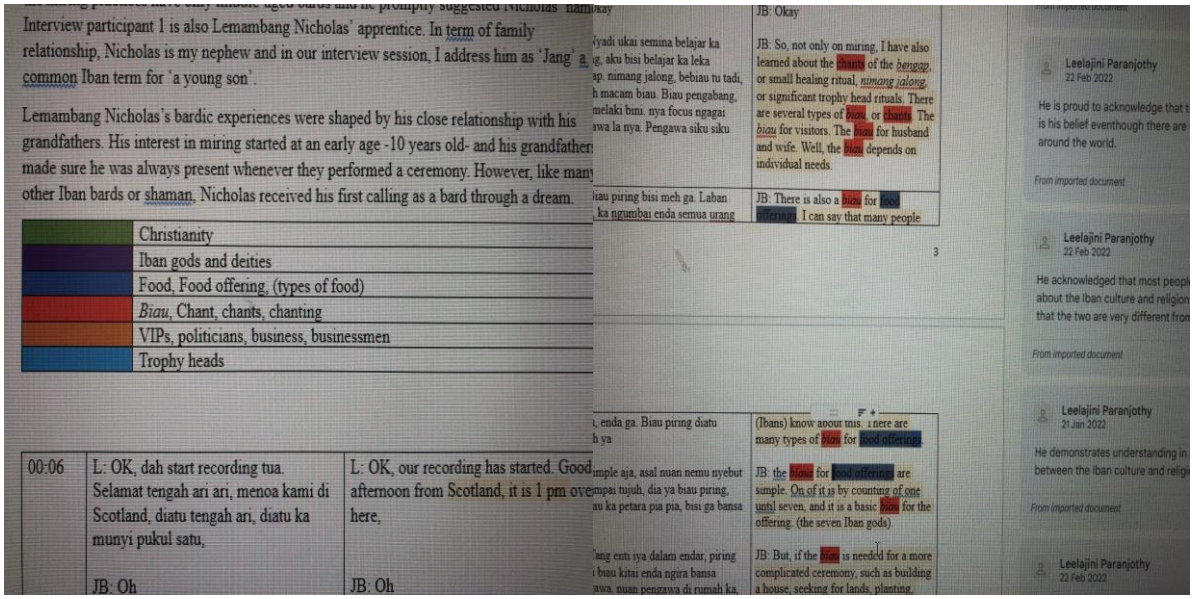

Figure 4.5: Colour codes for themes from my interview transcripts

Moving on from colour coding, I penned my own annotations and personal reflections for each interview transcript. I went through the transcripts several times to understand themes, making annotations for individual transcripts and filing my annotation documents separately from my interview transcripts. This approach allowed for a more nuanced examination of the data as it enabled me to inquire into the intricacies of participant responses and identify underlying themes and patterns. By meticulously reviewing each transcript multiple times, I gained a comprehensive understanding of the nuances and subtleties embedded within participant narratives.

My annotations served to capture key points, significant quotes, and notable observations, facilitating easier reference and retrieval of pertinent information during analysis. By maintaining separate annotation documents for each transcript, I ensured that my reflections and insights remained organised and easily accessible, contributing to a more systematic and structured approach to data analysis. Overall, the combination of colour coding, annotations, and personal reflections enriched the analytical process, allowing for a thorough exploration of the data and facilitating identification of salient themes and findings.

Phase 4: Reviewing themes

During this phase, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) process, I refined my themes and omitted any weaker ones – those lacking support from the data – from my initial thematic map. In this phase, the research must ask whether the themes that have been found are genuinely reflecting the ideas of the wider data set (Braun and Clarke, 2006). After examining the themes, I refined these according to the research questions, which meant I had to rework my themes several times. For example, I changed the theme 'gods and ancestors' to 'spiritual pantheon' because across the dataset, participants mentioned so many gods, ancestors, and deities that it made more sense to me to refer to it as such. Changes and modifications like these are seen to be common in this phase, with themes that are inadequate needing to be reconsidered (King, 2004).

Phase 5: Defining themes

This phase began with a satisfactory thematic map of my data that I used to further define my themes. Braun and Clarke (2006), advise that this phase allows the researcher to determine what is of interest in each theme, to tell the story of the themes, and see how they fit into the data set as a whole. I had responses to my first research question from across the dataset. I selected spectral communication and spectral thinking, ritual manifestations, and ritual mediators as the most prominent themes. This was only after the data had been well scrutinised (King, 2004).

Phase 6: Writing the report

Braun and Clarke (2006) make a number of recommendations for the final phase of the thematic analysis process. These include the careful writing up of the analysis results in a way that is concise, coherent, and logical. Other recommendations include ensuring that there are

direct quotes from the participants included in the written thesis, so as to demonstrate themes and give the flavour of the original data (King, 2004). Throughout my thesis, these recommendations have been followed, in order to allow the clear and transparent processes that have been followed.

4.6 Researcher reflexivity

Engaging in qualitative research profoundly impacts researchers, and I am no exception. Through reflexivity, I recognise the personal transformations that occur during the research process and how these changes influence my work. Reflexivity has been described as the development of heightened self-awareness during research (Elliott, 2005). This critical approach "requires researchers to find strategies to question their own thoughts, feelings, values, attitudes, prejudices, and actions to develop an understanding of their roles in relation to culture and others" (Nilson, 2016, p. 119). This process is ongoing and empowering, especially when my perspectives are challenged (Bolton 2010), underscoring the importance of acknowledging reflexivity as an integral component of research findings (Palaganas et al., 2017:426).

In this study, reflexivity is crucial due to my dual role as both researcher and kin to most participants, inherently influencing our interactions and outcomes. From the beginning of my research, I practised attentive reflexivity to check my assumptions, biases and beliefs. My insider knowledge could affect my views. Therefore, I maintained a reflective journal throughout the research process. This exercise aligns with Mezirow's (1981, p.6) attention to becoming critically aware of how our psycho-cultural assumptions curtail our perceptions and interactions. By regularly asking myself about my point of view, addressing my feelings and writing down my reflections, I reduced the impact of my biases.

I have nine research participants. I gave them time to tell their stories and weigh up their experiences. I assisted in open-ended discussions to help them reflect why they hold certain beliefs and how these beliefs form their practices and relations. This procedure mirrors Mezirow's (1981) concept of encouraging critical reflections among adults to help them be aware of and challenge their culturally induced dependency roles. (Mezirow, 1981, p.18). I adopted Braun and Clark's (2006, 2022) thematic analysis to identify recurring themes in my participants' narratives. I also looked for critical reflections on *miring* in their narratives,

following Mezirow's framework for identifying changes in perspective (Mezirow, 1981, p.14). I went through the participants' narratives multiple times and wrote down my own reflections on individual narratives. The study's findings are presented through excerpts representing the most recurring themes. For instance, when sharing their narrative about *miring*, the participants' most recurring theme was associating *miring* with *gawai* (harvest festival).

Of the nine participants, one participant chose to communicate in English, the rest of the interviews were conducted in Iban. Although Iban is my mother tongue, to ensure the accuracy of Iban to English translations, and the faithful conveyance of meanings, I enlisted the assistance of a linguistic proofreader from the Tun Jugah Foundation. This step was important in addressing potential biases in translation and interpretation that my personal fluency might overlook.

The interviews were conducted using Microsoft Stream, facilitated by Microsoft Teams, the primary platform endorsed by the University of Stirling. While this technology choice was influenced by institutional preferences, I assessed its impact on the interview process, considering factors like ease of use, reliability, and how it might affect participant engagement and response authenticity.

4.7 Ethical considerations

There were a number of risks in this research, and these needed to be addressed. Hammersley and Traianou (2016, p. 57) observe that harm must be avoided; therefore, researchers should ensure that their research would not harm their participants. In my study, I made sure that I took all the necessary precautions to minimise any potential harm to my interview participants. They were provided with information about the study, along with consent forms which were read to them. To minimise potential harm, qualitative researchers must respect participants' decisions to participate or withdraw from the research (Braun and Clark, 2013). I reminded the participants before I started and ended each interview about their rights to withdraw from the research during the data collection period.

Even though I am a researcher researching my own community, I still needed recommendations for participants for my research interviews. This means I needed to ask my uncle to be my research gatekeeper. This can raise ethical concerns and potential impacts on the participants (Orb et al., 2001 in Aluwihare-Samaranayake, 2012). In this study, my main gatekeeper, who suggested participants, was my *apai biak* (younger uncle). His role was important in

establishing initial contact and trust within the community. It is essential to navigate these relationships ethically to avoid undue influence or coercion. By working closely with my *apai biak* and ensuring transparency in my intentions and methods, I strive to reduce harm to my participants and my community.

Confidentiality is a high priority to the principles of privacy and respect for autonomy (Oliver, 2003; Gregory, 2003 in Wiles, 2013). It ensures that information provided by participants will not be disclosed without their permission. In a research context, confidentiality means that information about individuals collected during the research will not be shared, and participants' identities will be protected through anonymisation processes (Wiles, 2013, p. 42). To uphold this principle, I anonymised the names of all participants in this study.

Christians (2007 in Aluwihare-Samaranayake, 2012) suggests that one of the tenets of qualitative research is to enable the humane transformation of multiple interpretations of people's lives and community experiences. Emancipatory strategies such as dialogue, reflexive questioning, and active listening are integral to this process, (Aluwihare-Samaranayake, 2012). In this study, I followed reflexive questionings, writing a journal and making notes for each interview to ensure understanding and respect. Engaging participants in meaningful conversations and encouraging them to reflect on their experiences helped to create a collaborative and ethical research environment.

By strictly adhering to these ethical principles, this study is committed to respecting and protecting the rights and well-being of all participants. The avoidance of harm, responsible use of gatekeepers, proactive addressing of potential ethical conflicts, assurance of confidentiality, and implementation of emancipatory strategies are all integral to the ethical research practice. These measures not only ensure the contribution of the research to academic knowledge but also its respect and upliftment of the community involved.

Chapter summary

The chapter began by discussing the study's methodological nature, detailing my unique position as a researcher and a member of the Iban tribe, offering insights into the intricacies of conducting research within one's own cultural context. The chapter also described the recruitment process, data collection methods, and ethical considerations. It underscored the

importance of kinship ties in accessing research participants and ensuring cultural relevance and respect throughout the interview process. Furthermore, the chapter detailed the data analysis process employed. Overall, this chapter explained the methodological underpinnings of the study, providing the necessary detail of the study's implementation that provide a necessary context for understanding subsequent analysis and findings in the following chapters.

In the next chapter Five, I will present analysis and findings discussing spectral communication and spectral thinking.

Chapter Five: Spectral Communication and Spectral Thinking

"So, if you go to school, you have a belief. When you go to school, you have a belief because you have to choose between dominant (listed) religions. Like Islam, Budhism, Hindu, Christian or Bahai. But the Iban religion is not listed. It is not recognised. Even those who do not have a belief have a free thinker option," Radin

Introduction

This chapter presents a methodical examination of my collected data, focusing on the *miring* ritual, to illustrate the nuanced ways in which the Iban community integrates its spiritual pantheon. By doing so, it addresses evolving scholarly ideas within the sociolinguistics of spectres, as outlined by Szeman (2000), Cameron (2008), Hollan (2020), and Deumert (2018, 2022) and applies these theoretical frameworks to the specific context of the Iban rituals. Through this analysis, I aim to bridge the gap between the spectral and the human, shedding light on the meaningful relationships Iban people maintain with their spectres, thereby providing a deeper understanding of their way of life and the underlying sociolinguistic dynamics at play.

I start my analytical discussion by noting that it is based primarily on my interpretation of data, not theory. By involving theory, I refer to my theoretical framework discussed in Chapter Two and Three. I discuss the interview data in terms of the following:

1) how spectral communication may transcend linguistic constraints and involve non-verbal or non-linguistic elements, such as dreams, to convey meaning and facilitate interaction with the spectral realm.

2) the concept of spectral thinking and its application in interpreting dreams, animal offal, spiritual pantheon, and chants within the context of spectral communication; and

3) How spectral thinking unsettles conventional notions of reality and agency, emphasising the interconnectedness between the visible and invisible, the material and spiritual, and the past, present, and future.

To analyse the data, I first provide an interview excerpt, followed by a summary of the content. Next, I discuss my findings with reference to research reviewed in Chapters 2 and 3.

5.1 Dreams

The Ibans considered dreams and omens as a way their ancestors could communicate with them about anything. In the interviews, they said dreams are not merely a casual aspect of their lives. Rather, they occupy a pivotal role in shaping the Iban way of life. Within the Iban worldview, dreams are revered as a profound channel through which communication between humans and the deities and spirits of their belief system occurs, (Sutlive and Sutlive, 2001).

These earlier findings resonate with my participants' narratives about dreams. In Excerpts 5.1, 5.2, and 5.3, Radin, Belayong, and Lambat recall their dream experiences. In Excerpt 5.4, Cherang relays a slightly different dream narrative which is not his own but from prospective *kelam ai* divers, an event he witnessed when he was younger.

Excerpt 5.1: Radin - description of his dreams

> …therefore, during a festival, I join the *miring* ceremony, that's how I 'reunite', with the *miring*. And I performed my own *miring* after experiencing a dream.
> The spirits will visit through dreams, and when we have dreams, when we receive omens, we perform the *miring*. If the omen is good, to ensure it stays, we will perform the *miring*. If the omen is unfavourable, we have to overturn it, so we perform the *miring* to ask for forgiveness. They will eat, therefore we perform the *miring* and offer food to them. So that they will be happy.…Therefore, when we dream, and it is about the members of the spirit realm, we perform the *miring*, so they are appeased. In some dreams, the spirit of the dead informs the living that it is taking 'home' someone, so, if you don't perform the *miring*, someone living will die, and that's the consequences of not performing the *miring*. That's what I will do if I receive dreams. However, dreams, interpretations, and omens are not written in any books. Therefore, comparisons were made based on these passed down information according to the elders. Oral history, and then interpretations were made. they interpret based on logic, based on experience and make comparisons with the things that happen in their surroundings.then, how would they decide on which *miring*? If the omen is good, it will decide to perform the *miring* that would accept the blessing offered. If the dream is unfavourable, the *miring* must be performed to prevent bad consequences and we also seek forgiveness.

Excerpt 5.2: Belayong- history of his dreams

> B:What is that for, how is it done, everything. Whatever he can tell of these rituals, he will explain them all to me. However, when I was in form 2 (14 years old) my grandfather passed away. Then when I was in form 6, (17/18 years old) I received a dream. In the beginning of my dream, my grandfather was asking for food. Therefore, we performed the *miring* for him. The second time I received him in a dream, he had asked me to become a *manang*, or shaman. When I refused to accept the offer, not long after, I fell ill. I underwent two operations/ surgeries in 2014. In the same year, while unconscious, I received another dream. The feeling was very real, as if I was meeting

him face to face. When I recovered from the operations, I decided to learn. (about shamanism.)

Excerpt 5.3: Lambat-description of his dreams

> l:I became a *lemambang* (bard) when I had a dream. I was 18 years old at the time. I was given a staff when I was 'anointed' as a *lemambang.* I was a *lemamban*g before my own father and uncles.
> L: So, when you were 18, you were given a *lemambang'*s staff?
> l: Rawas's grandmother came to our longhouse in '63, maybe? When her grandmother came in 1963, I had already performed *lemambang* duties.

Excerpt 5.4: Cherang - a narration of dreams while preparing for *kelam ai*

> C:Before the rooster crows, before 3:00 a.m., everyone was awake – especially the ones involved in the trial. Then, the elders started the day by asking the two champions whether they had received any dreams., "So, did any of you receive any dreams? Which of you had a dream?" Then, the two explained their experiences throughout the early dawn. Only a few could know about their stories. The rest were not able to know which of the two [had dreams]. Which champion would actually [(represent Mujah]), we would not know until the trial

5.1.1 Analysis and discussion

Hollan (2020) underscores that ghosts and spirits, considered ontologically "real" by the people studied, are highly social and knowable in many respects. Although typically invisible, they often manifest in dreams where they can be interacted with directly, (Hollan, 2020, p. 456). These spectral entities, while potentially dangerous, generally act in comprehensible and predictable ways, especially to shamans or other experts. Their malicious actions are usually driven by apparent reasons such as hunger or perceived slights, which can be assuaged through appropriate rituals. This understanding resonates with Deumert's (2022) concept of spectral thinking, "emphasises our complex interconnectedness with the social and material world, with past present-future, with effects that are brought about by other-than-human voices and actions" (Deumert, 2022, p. 4).

In the context of the Iban, dreams serve as a primary medium for spectral communication, bridging the gap between the human and spiritual realms. In this section, I will analyse and discuss findings based on narratives about dreams from Radin, Belayong, Lambat and Cherang.

Excerpt 5.1

Radin's narrative provides substantial evidence for my claims regarding the sociolinguistics of spectres and their influence on Iban cultural practices. He describes how dreams guide his actions and decisions: "...during a festival, I join the *miring* ceremony, that's how I 'reunite' with the *miring*. And I performed my own *miring* after experiencing a dream. The spirits will visit through dreams, and when we have dreams, when we receive omens, we perform the *miring*. If the omen is good, to ensure it stays, we will perform the *miring*. If the omen is unfavourable, we have to overturn it, so we perform the *miring* to ask for forgiveness. They will eat, therefore we perform the *miring* and offer food to them. So that they will be happy." This account validates the assumption that dreams serve as a crucial medium for communication with the spiritual realm, guiding the actions and decisions of individuals within the community.

Radin's description of his dreams provides concrete evidence supporting the theoretical claim. He explains how *miring* ceremonies are performed in response to dreams and omens, highlighting the role of spectral communication in Iban culture. He notes that spirits visit through dreams, and the community performs *miring* to either sustain a good omen or counteract an unfavourable one. This practice underscores the belief that spectral entities actively influence the living, and rituals are necessary to maintain harmony and avert potential misfortune. Radin states, "The spirits will visit through dreams, and when we have dreams, when we receive omens, we perform the *miring*. If the omen is good, to ensure it stays, we will perform the *miring*. If the omen is unfavourable, we have to overturn it, so we perform the *miring* to ask for forgiveness."

The *miring*, as described by Radin, exemplifies Santos' concept of vernacular theory (Santos, 2018 in Deumert, 2022, p.2). The rituals and interpretations associated with dreams and omens are transmitted through oral history and communal experience. Radin highlights, "However, dreams, interpretations, and omens are not written in any books. Therefore, comparisons were made based on this passed-down information according to the elders." Radin's account confirms that spectral entities are perceived to have a tangible impact on human life. The need to perform *miring* ceremonies to address both favourable and unfavourable omens points out the belief in the agency of spirits. He explains, "In some dreams, the spirit of the dead informs the living that it is taking 'home' someone, so, if you don't perform the *miring*, someone living will die, and that's the consequences of not performing the *miring*." This supports the claim that spectral communication is a vital aspect of Iban way of living.

Radin's experience also highlights the negotiation between traditional Iban beliefs and Christianity. Despite his Christian faith, he continues to perform *miring* based on dreams and omens, reflecting the syncretic nature of his spiritual practice. Radin asserts, “I do believe that Jesus is my saviour and he is the only way to heaven… When it comes to prayers, I do pray the Christian way, and if what I am doing is wrong in the Christian way, I ask for forgiveness. So when it comes to this, if I experience any dreams or omens, I will perform the *miring*. It is the way I live in this world.”

Deumert (2022) posits that the sociolinguistics of the spectre are grounded in radical empiricism, acknowledging the sensuous and affective nature of social life. This framework resists the "boundaries, binaries and demarcations" embedded in the linear temporality of modernity (Garuba, 2013 in Deumert, 2022, p.2). Radin's narrative about his dreams and the associated *miring* ceremonies provides a clear illustration of this claim, demonstrating how the Iban's engagement with spectral communication transcends conventional temporal and spatial boundaries.

Radin's conversation emphasises the main role of dreams as mediums for spectral communication. He describes how dreams guide the performance of the *miring* ceremony: “The spirits will visit through dreams, and when we have dreams, when we receive omens, we perform the *miring*.” This process reflects a non-linear conception of time and space, where the past, present, and future are interconnected through spiritual practices. The spirits, although from another realm, actively influence the living through dreams, which prompts specific ritual actions in the present.

Radin's detailed explanation of the *miring* ceremony reflects the sensuous and affective dimensions of these practices. He notes, "They will eat, therefore we perform the *miring* and offer food to them. So that they will be happy." This ritual feeding of the spirits demonstrates the affective nature of the relationship between the living and the dead, where sensory experiences like offering and consuming food play a crucial role in maintaining harmony between realms.

Radin's narrative also challenges the boundaries and binaries typical of modernist thought. He explains that if the omen from a dream is good, a *miring* ceremony is performed to ensure it stays; if the omen is unfavourable, a *miring* is conducted to avert negative consequences and seek forgiveness. This fluid approach to dealing with omens and dreams highlights a flexible,

context-dependent understanding of agency and causality, which contrasts sharply with the fixed, binary thinking characteristic of modernity.

The reliance on oral history and communal interpretation further exemplifies the radical empiricism in Deumert's (2022, p. 9) research, in which Radin states, “Dreams, interpretations, and omens are not written in any books. Therefore, comparisons were made based on these passed down information according to the elders. Oral history, and then interpretations were made.” This method of knowledge transmission and interpretation emphasises experiential learning and collective wisdom, rejecting the rigid demarcations between written and oral, formal and informal knowledge systems.

Excerpt 5.2

Belayong recounts his dream at the age of approximately 17 or 18. After dreaming about his late grandfather asking for food, he performed the *miring* for his grandfather to appease his spirits. After his second dream about his grandfather, Belayong asked to become a *manan*g. This narrative resonates with Masing (1981), who saw the function of dreams as a spiritual calling and noted “first, the Ibans believed that their calling into becoming a shaman or bard must be through dreams and auguries' '. My other interviewees, Radin, Lambat and Cherang each acknowledged receiving a dream before becoming a *manang* or a *lemambang*. Belayong's narrative provides concrete evidence supporting Deumert’s (2022) research about spectral thinking and communication. He recounts how his dreams, which he perceived as visits from his deceased grandfather, led him to perform *miring* rituals and eventually embrace his role as a *manang*. Belayong shares, “In the beginning of my dream, my grandfather was asking for food. Therefore, we performed the *miring* for him. The second time I received him in a dream, he had asked me to become a *manang*. When I refused to accept the offer, not long after, I fell ill.” This experience underscores the significance of dreams as a medium for spectral communication in the Iban culture.

Deumert (2022) argues that spectral thinking unsettles traditional ideas of sovereign agency by emphasising interconnectedness with the social and material world. Belayong's narrative illustrates this by showing how his dreams, influenced by spectral entities, guided his actions and decisions. His grandfather’s request in the dream and the subsequent illness he experienced

upon refusal indicate that his agency was influenced by spectral forces, challenging the notion of a sovereign, autonomous self.

Sutlive (1991) and Sutlive & Sutlive (2001) highlight the importance of dreams in Iban culture as reliable mediums for communication with the spiritual realm. Belayong's experience aligns with this, as he describes how his grandfather's spectral presence in his dreams conveyed messages and requests. "The spirits will visit through dreams, and when we have dreams, when we receive omens, we perform the *miring*," he explains. This underscores the role of dreams in maintaining a connection with the spiritual world and facilitating spectral communication.

Deumert's (2022, p.6) perspectives on spectral thinking emphasise the interconnectedness of past, present, and future. Belayong's narrative exemplifies this by showing how his grandfather's spectral presence continues to influence his life decisions and spiritual practices. This interconnectedness is further highlighted when he states, "The feeling was very real, as if I was meeting him face to face." This sense of direct interaction with the past through spectral communication aligns with the theoretical claim of temporal interconnectedness.

Radway's notion that "the ghost is not simply a dead or missing person, but a social figure" (Gordon, 2008, p. 8) is evident in Belayong's narrative. His grandfather's spectral presence acts as a social figure, guiding him toward shamanism and influencing his cultural practices. This aligns with the idea that investigating spectral entities can reveal the dense site where history and subjectivity intersect, shaping social life and cultural continuity.

Deumert's (2022) concept of spectral thinking as a form of vernacular theory is reflected in Belayong's description of *miring* rituals and their significance in his life. The material practice of offering food to spirits during *miring* ceremonies highlights the tangible aspects of spectral communication and its role in maintaining cultural traditions. "They will eat, therefore we perform the *miring* and offer food to them. So that they will be happy," Belayong notes, emphasising the material and symbolic dimensions of these practices.

Deumert's (2022) research, emphasises the intersection of language and culture. Belayong's grandfather asking him to become a *manang* indicates a complex interplay between the living and the deceased. Radin, Belayong, and Lambat all see their dreams as a form of communication between realms – communication that is not limited to the living but extends into the spirit world. Belayong's dream of becoming a *manang* suggests a significant change

in his identity within the community. as his transformation into a bard carries implications for his role in the community and his cultural identity.

Excerpt 5.3

Lambat's narrative showcases how the Ibans draw on a wide array of semiotic resources, such as dreams and rituals, to challenge the hegemony of standardised notions of agency and identity. By incorporating spectral communication into their social practices, the Ibans maintain a fluid and dynamic understanding of agency that transcends human-centric perspectives.

Lambat's account also aligns with Deumert's (2022) spectral advocacy. He became a *lemambang* after having a significant dream at the age of 18. "I became a *lemambang* (bard) when I had a dream. I was 18 years old at the time. I was given a staff when I was 'anointed' as a *lemambang*." This illustrates how dreams serve as a medium for spectral communication, influencing social roles and responsibilities. Lambat's narrative emphasises the role of dreams in validating and guiding significant life choices and societal roles within the Iban culture.This personal experience illustrates how dreams serve as pivotal moments of communication and transformation within Iban society.

Lambat's statement that he became a *lemambang* before his father and uncles further hints at the complex hierarchy and dynamics within his community. He states, "I was a *lemambang* before my own father and uncles."This demonstrates how language and sociolinguistic practices can influence social hierarchies and relationships. The account of his dream and his role as a *lemambang* also exemplifies the interconnectedness of dreams and ancestral beliefs. Lambat's narrative suggests that dreams serve as a means of communication with the spirit realm, and individuals like Lambat play a crucial role in interpreting and conveying these messages through language and storytelling.

These spectral encounters can affect the individual understanding of self and community, underscoring how language and dreams intersect to transform individuals' identities and roles within their communities, (Deumert 2022, p. 10). Lambat's mention of being a *lemambang* and receiving a staff as part of the initiation process underscores the cultural significance of this role within the community. *Lemambang* are traditional bards or storytellers, and the act of becoming one carries cultural and linguistic implications. It is through language and

storytelling that cultural knowledge and history are transmitted, illustrating the connection between language, culture, and identity.

The concept of spectral thinking unsettles the idea of sovereign agency by highlighting how non-human voices and actions, such as those of spirits and ancestors, influence human behaviour. Lambat's experience exemplifies this, as he became a *lemambang* because of a dream, suggesting that his agency was guided by spectral forces. The dream and the subsequent anointment with the staff symbolise the interconnectedness between the spiritual and material worlds. This aligns with the claim that Iban dreams are more than visual experiences; they are principal mediums for communication with the dead (Sutlive, 1991). The dream bestowed upon Lambat the role of *lemambang*, demonstrating how the spirits' guidance shapes individual roles and responsibilities within the community.

Excerpt 5.4

Cherang's narrative provides substantial evidence for my theoretical claims. He describes a practice where, before dawn, elders inquire of the champions involved in a trial about their dreams: "Before the rooster crows, before 3:00 a.m., everyone was awake – especially the ones involved in the trial. Then, the elders started the day by asking the two champions whether they had received any dreams. 'So, did any of you receive any dreams? Which of you had a dream?' Then, the two explained their experiences throughout the early dawn." This narration exemplifies how dreams are integral to decision-making processes and the interpretation of events within the Iban community.

Iban cultural practices are interwoven with their spiritual beliefs, where dreams serve as a crucial medium for communication with the spiritual realm. Cherang's account validates this assumption by demonstrating how dreams guide the actions and decisions of individuals within the community. This supports the claim that spectral communication through dreams is essential to Iban social and cultural life.

Spectral thinking challenges traditional notions of sovereign agency by highlighting the influence of non-human voices and actions, such as those of spirits and ancestors, on human behaviour. Cherang's narrative illustrates this through the practice of interpreting dreams before a trial. The elders' inquiry into the dreams of the champions underscores the belief that these dreams, influenced by spiritual entities, hold significant sway over the proceedings and outcomes of human affairs. This aligns with the theoretical claim that Iban dreams are a

principal medium for communication with the dead and for guiding human actions (Sutlive, 1991).

Cherang's account showcases how the Ibans draw on semiotic resources, such as dreams and rituals, to challenge standardised notions of agency and identity. By incorporating spectral communication into their social practices, the Ibans maintain a fluid understanding of agency that transcends human-centric perspectives. This practice of using dreams as a guide for decision-making disrupts the hegemonic idea of a singular, sovereign human agency and instead highlights a complex interplay between human and non-human influences.

Cherang's narrative also emphasises the Iban belief in the interconnectedness of past, present, and future through spectral communication. The elders' practice of asking the champions about their dreams reflects a belief in the continuity and influence of the spiritual realm on current and future events. This interconnectedness is evident in the statement, "Then, the two explained their experiences throughout the early dawn," suggesting that the interpretations of these dreams, rooted in past wisdom and spiritual guidance, shape the present actions and future outcomes of the community.

Cherang recalls the importance of dreams in his narration of the *kelam ai* he witnessed when he was young. In the hours before dawn, he recalls how crowds anticipating the event were awake and the elders questioned the two divers about whether they had received any dreams. Cherang explains how between the two divers, the one who receives a dream is selected to represent the plaintiff and defendant of the trial. The two divers made their answers known to only a few, while the rest of the crowd had to wait in anticipation of which diver would represent Mujah, the so-called plaintiff of the dispute, according to the interpretation of their dreams. Cherang says he did not know who would champion Mujah until the event itself. The story thus highlights the cultural significance of *kelam ai* dreams within his community. The reference to the early morning ritual of asking the two champions whether they received any dreams indicates that dreams played a central role in a significant cultural event, such as the *kelam ai*.

The involvement of elders in the morning ritual is indicative of the role of wisdom and authority figures in interpreting and guiding the community's actions based on these dreams. The oral tradition of sharing dreams and experiences through storytelling is vital in this context, as it contributes to the preservation and transmission of cultural knowledge. The elders serve as

conduits for this transmission, and Cherang's narrative highlights how dreams are a form of communication within the community. The dreams of the two champions are significant in determining who will represent Mujah in the trial or competition. These instances convey that access to information about the dreams is restricted to certain individuals or groups, thus highlighting the importance of maintaining confidentiality and discretion regarding matters of spiritual or cultural significance. They also suggest that the interpretation and communication of dreams may be entrusted to specific members of the community who possess specialised knowledge or spiritual insight.

The emphasis on dreams as a form of communication reflects broader cultural beliefs and practices within the community. It indicates a belief in the spiritual significance of dreams and their ability to convey messages from the spiritual realm. By highlighting the importance of dreams in determining key decisions or actions within the community, the excerpt illustrates the integration of spiritual beliefs into everyday life and decision-making processes.

Conclusion

By integrating these theoretical claims with the narratives of Radin, Belayong, Lambat, and Cherang, dreams are essential mediums for spectral communication in Iban culture. The data supports the claim that dreams guide individual and communal actions, serving as a bridge between the human and spiritual realms. This analysis points out the importance of spectral thinking in understanding Iban beliefs, highlighting the complex interplay between human and non-human agency in shaping their social reality. The concept of spectral thinking and the empirical evidence from these narratives reflect the claim that the Ibans use dreams as a principal medium for spectral communication, reinforcing their interconnectedness with the spiritual world.

5.2 Animal sightings and interpretations of animal offal

Similar to dreams, animal sightings/offal serve as channels for communication with the supernatural realm. In both cases, the Ibans believe that they are receiving messages or guidance from ancestral spirits, deities, or other spiritual entities. This communication is integral to maintaining harmony with the spirit world and seeking spiritual guidance in everyday life.

Photographs 5.1–5.3: Preparation of *piring* for a *miring* at the entrance of the longhouse

In the photographs above, the longhouse elders prepare a pig in a gunny sack that is slaughtered immediately after the *miring*. The pig's liver is then read and deciphered by the Iban elders. The Ibans regard the liver as carrying messages or signs sent by the invoked gods, spirits, or ancestors.

The next interview excerpts, 5.6, 5.7, and 5.8, further illustrate Iban perspectives on animal sightings. Belayong, Tajek, and Lambat, my study participants in the next excerpts, reside in the longhouse with only Belayong temporarily relocating to the city for educational and employment purposes. Situated amidst the jungle and close to a river, the longhouse serves as their primary residence wherein animals play a significant role in sustaining the livelihood of the Iban community.

Excerpt 5.6: Belayong – explanation of animal sightings

> B: Yes, yes you cannot just simply dispose of the trophy heads. However, you will expect the bad consequences of doing so. That is all I am trying to say. Another example that I can give is about the sightings of animals coming into our homes. It can be a bird or a snake. If you simply chase these animals away without having a *miring* ceremony, it is definitely not right. If they are the bearer of bad news. If they are the bearer of bad news and you have the *miring*, you will not suffer from bad consequences, or at least

the effects will be minimal. If you do not have the *miring* at all, you will receive a hundred percent of the bad consequences.

Excerpt 5.7: Tajek – explanation of animal sightings

T: There are other animals that carry news too. Like the mouse deer, the deer that bring omens to our paddy fields. We offer our *miring* to invoke the gods so that our crops will be protected.
L: What will happen if we do not offer any *miring* ceremony?
T: Bad things will happen of course. We have to offer sacrifices if any bad things happen. We have to sacrifice a pig. Then we have to interpret the pig's liver whether we have managed to please the gods.

Excerpt 5.8: Lambat – explanation of animal sightings

I know how to read signs. For instance, if an animal crosses in front of me, and I receive dreams.

5.2.1 Analysis and discussion

My research integrates the theoretical framework of spectral thinking with empirical data to explore the significance of animal sightings and spectral communication in Iban culture. The concept of spectral thinking, as articulated by Deumert (2022, p. 5), posits that the primary question is not whether ghosts exist but what "thinking with ghosts" might afford us. This perspective encourages us to consider the broader implications and effects of spectral entities on social, psychological, and political aspects of human life. Hollan (2020) further reinforces this idea by emphasising that ghosts and other spiritual beings, although immaterial, can have significant impacts on the human world and behavioural environment. As Hollan states, "ghosts have returned to anthropology" because they continue to have profound social, psychological, and political effects, despite their immaterial nature, (Hollan, 2020, 451).

Within this framework, my research examines how the Ibans interpret animal signs and omens, as well as the practice of reading animal offal during rituals. These practices highlight the Iban's profound connection with their environment and the spiritual significance they attribute to the animal kingdom.

My study participants, Belayong, Tajek and Lambat share their narratives about animal signs and omens, as well as reading animal offal during rituals.

Excerpt 5.6

In my study, Belayong's narrative provides compelling evidence that supports these theoretical claims. He describes the Iban practice of interpreting animal sightings, such as birds and snakes, as significant omens that necessitate ritualistic responses to mitigate potential negative consequences. Belayong explains, "Another example that I can give is about the sightings of animals coming into our homes. It can be a bird or a snake. If you simply chase these animals away without having a *miring* ceremony, it is definitely not right. If they are the bearer of bad news and you have the *miring*, you will not suffer from bad consequences, or at least the effects will be minimal."

This statement highlights the deeply ingrained belief in the power of omens and the necessity of performing *miring* ceremonies to appease the spirits associated with these signs. By adhering to these rituals, the Ibans seek to maintain harmony and prevent adverse outcomes. Belayong elaborates on the consequences of neglecting these omens, stating, "If you do not have the *miring* at all, you will receive a hundred percent of the bad consequences." This reinforces the idea that spectral entities and their associated rituals have tangible effects on the Iban community's well-being.

Belayong's interview excerpt provides valuable insights into the role of spectral communication and spectral thinking in Iban culture. It underscores the interconnectedness of the visible and invisible realms, the importance of rituals in facilitating spectral communication, and belief in spiritual influence on human affairs. Moreover, it reflects a worldview grounded in spectral thinking, wherein causal relationships extend beyond the material realm and encompass spiritual dimensions. Through the lens of Belayong's narrative, we can gain a deeper understanding of the cultural significance of rituals and beliefs in navigating the complexities of the visible and invisible worlds within the Iban community.

Excerpt 5.7

Tajek's narrative provides compelling evidence that supports these theoretical claims. She describes the Iban practice of interpreting animal sightings, such as mouse deer and deer, as significant omens that necessitate ritualistic responses to protect their paddy fields. Tajek explains, "There are other animals that carry news too. Like the mouse deer, the deer that bring omens to our paddy fields. We offer our *miring* to invoke the gods so that our crops will be protected." Tajek's statement highlights the ingrained belief in the power of omens and the

necessity of performing *miring* ceremonies to appease the spirits associated with these signs. By adhering to these rituals, the Ibans seek to maintain harmony and prevent adverse outcomes. Tajek further explains the consequences of neglecting these omens, stating, "Bad things will happen of course. We have to offer sacrifices if any bad things happen. We have to sacrifice a pig. Then we have to interpret the pig's liver whether we have managed to please the gods."

This reinforces the idea that spectral entities and their associated rituals have tangible effects on the Iban community's well-being. By integrating the theoretical claims of Deumert (2022) and Hollan (2020) with Tajek's narrative, I can confidently assert that thinking with ghosts, or spectral entities, affords a deeper understanding of the Iban cultural practices and their significance. The data supports the claim that the Ibans' interpretation of animal sightings as omens and their subsequent responses are integral to their social and spiritual life. This practice exemplifies how spectral thinking unsettles traditional notions of sovereign agency and emphasises the interconnectedness between the human and spiritual realms, (Deumert, 2022, p. 4).

Tajek shares about animals that bring 'news' or carry omens informing her about the health of her rice farm. She identifies the mousedeer as one such animal and conducts *miring* to seek help from the deities that would protect her rice farm. Tajek's mention of interpreting the pig liver as a means of assessing whether the gods are pleased underscores the importance of divination practices within the Iban way of living. Examination of animal offal, such as the liver, is believed to reveal insights into the spiritual realm and the efficacy of ritual offerings. This reflects a form of spectral thinking where natural phenomena are interpreted as symbolic messages from the spirit world.

Tajek's engagement with animal sightings reflects a deep belief in the significance of certain animals, such as the mousedeer and deer, as carriers of omens or news. In her cultural worldview, these animals are seen as messengers or signs from the spiritual realm. Tajek explains that they conduct *miring* ceremonies to invoke the gods, seeking protection for their crops particularly in the paddy fields. This practice represents a form of communication with the spiritual realm, with the goal of ensuring a bountiful harvest and safeguarding their livelihoods. According to Tajek, if they do not offer a *miring* ceremony, bad things will happen. This belief reflects the notion that there are potential consequences for failure to engage in the prescribed rituals and communication with the gods.

Excerpt 5.8

Lambat's narrative provides compelling evidence that supports these theoretical claims. He describes his ability to interpret animal sightings and the importance of these signs in guiding his actions and rituals. Lambat explains, "I know how to read signs. For instance, if an animal crosses in front of me, and I receive dreams. I have performed healing rituals in Niah, Brunei, and Limbang. I have been invited to perform healing rituals to many faraway places. And so is *nimang jalong* (significant healing ritual). I have been invited to many places. I was invited by many people; I was the best in my trade. Many other *lemambang* tried to outperform me but I was simply the best."

This statement highlights the deeply ingrained belief in the power of omens and the necessity of performing rituals in response to these signs. By adhering to these rituals, the Ibans seek to maintain harmony and prevent adverse outcomes. Lambat's ability to read signs and perform healing rituals in various locations underscores the significance of spectral communication in his role as a *lemambang*.

Lambat mentions his ability to read signs, particularly those involving animal sightings. In his cultural context, these animal sightings are considered significant and carry meaning. Lambat states that if an animal crosses in front of him and he receives dreams, he must perform healing rituals in various places. This suggests that animal sightings can trigger a series of actions, including the performance of healing rituals. In Iban practice, individuals engage in dialogue with spirits, ghosts, deities, and ancestors. A sociolinguistic analysis of the spectral realm expands the limits of language and cognition. This approach allows for the examination of our connection to the deceased, the investigation of the enigmatic identities of the living, and the exploration of the boundaries between conscious and unconscious thought (Davis 2005, p. 379).

Lambat says that his engagement with animal sightings and his role as a healer and communicator bring him recognition and invitations to various places. This suggests that he hopes to achieve recognition, respect, and perhaps a sense of fulfilment through his abilities and practices. In summary, Lambat's engagement with animal sightings and his role as a healer and communicator with the spiritual realm exemplify the intricate relationship between language, culture, and spirituality.

The above discussion presents insights gleaned from interviews with Belayong, Tajek, and Lambat within the framework of spectral communication and thinking in Iban culture. Belayong articulates the interconnectedness of the visible and invisible realms, highlighting the spiritual consequences of neglecting rituals such as *miring* ceremonies. He emphasises the importance of appeasing ancestral spirits through proper rituals, reflecting a worldview grounded in spectral thinking where events have spiritual causes and consequences. Tajek similarly emphasises the significance of rituals such as *miring* ceremonies when communicating with the spirit world and ensuring protection for crops. She underscores the role of animals as messengers of spiritual omens and warns of the consequences of neglecting ritual offerings, reflecting a deep-seated belief in the influence of the spiritual realm on human affairs. Lambat's engagement with animal sightings showcases the cultural importance of interpreting signs and performing healing rituals. His position as a healer and communicator with the spectral world highlights the social significance of these practices within the community, reflecting the interplay between language, culture, and spirituality.

Conclusion

By combining these narratives, I demonstrate how the Ibans' interpretation of animal sightings and omens, as well as the practice of reading animal offal, are integral to their spectral communication. These practices exemplify how spectral thinking unsettles traditional notions of agency and emphasises the interconnectedness between the human and spiritual realms. The data supports the claim that the Ibans' engagement with spectral entities through these practices is a vital aspect of their social and spiritual life, underscoring the importance of spectral thinking in understanding their cultural beliefs and behaviours.

This analysis underscores the importance of spectral thinking in understanding Iban beliefs and highlights the profound interplay between human actions and spectral influences in shaping their social reality.

5.3 Countering unruly spirits

Sather (2001) briefly mentions the existence of entities beyond humans within Iban cosmology, particularly those believed to coexist in the human world and share the domain of the living. Sather also mentions how the actions of these entities are believed to have an impact on the

health and overall well-being of humans; a significant portion of severe illnesses is attributed, to some extent, to the influence of *antu* (spirits). While it is acknowledged that factors such as an inadequate diet, excessive labour and harsh living conditions as well as other natural causes can contribute to poor health, the prevailing belief is that spirits (many of whom are inherently perceived as having malevolent intentions towards humans) are the most common causal agents (Sather 2012, pp. 65–66).

My interviewees Daud refers to Covid-19 as one of the unruly spirits affecting the Iban way of living and Belayong narrates the events when he performed the *miring* to appease a land guardian.

Excerpt 5.13: Daud – description of *miring* to protect the longhouse from Covid-19

> When the world fell sick recently, our longhouse needed to take immediate action to ward off evil spirits. We need to keep the evil at the longhouse's steps and not let it proceed to enter. Therefore, a *miring* ceremony was organised at the front steps of the longhouse to prevent Covid-19 from entering the longhouse. That is how we protect our longhouse.

Excerpt 5.14: Belayong– description of an unruly land guardian

> There was one person in Miri who was clearing land for cultivation. Unknown to him, that land has a guardian. The guardian is an evil land spirit. That person's body suffered from a skin disease. Every month he would go to the doctor and was prescribed many types of skin creams. He even went to a skin specialist and was also prescribed creams. Sometimes the creams give him relief but the disease never goes away. He seeks for traditional medicines and the person he consulted told him about the evil spirit in the land he is clearing. He was advised to seek the spirit's forgiveness. So, he seeks for someone who knows how to. That is when they came for me. The old folks were not strong enough for the task. So I went voluntarily to help.
> We had a *miring* ceremony in the land that he was cultivating. We seek forgiveness, sacrifice two chickens and offer our chants. We buried into the soil three food offerings, and another seven were hung above ground with a cross like pole.Then we headed to his home, and we did not have to have the *miring* ceremony anymore, only had the food prepared for us. In less than two weeks, he was healed from his disease. He does not have to see the doctors anymore.

5.3.1 Analysis and discussion

In my research, I integrate the theoretical framework of spectral thinking with empirical data to explore the significance of animal sightings and spectral communication in Iban culture. Deumert (2022) posits that spectral thinking is deeply embedded in everyday life and extends

across a vast semantic field, including terms like vision, spectre, apparition, spirit, ghost, and many others. These spectral entities evoke a range of emotional responses, from horror to amazement, and influence human behaviour in profound ways. As Hollan (2020) notes, "Ghosts have returned to anthropology" because they continue to have significant social, psychological, and political effects despite their immaterial nature. This is further supported by Sather (2001), who explains that within Iban cosmology, spirits or *antu* are believed to coexist with humans and significantly impact their health and wellbeing.

Excerpt 5.13

The belief in the influence of spirits is evident in the Iban practice of performing *miring* ceremonies, which are rituals conducted to appease spirits and protect the community. Daud's narrative provides a clear example of this practice. He describes how his longhouse organised a *miring* ceremony at the front steps of the longhouse to protect against Covid-19. He explains, "When the world fell sick recently, our longhouse needed to take immediate action to ward off evil spirits. We need to keep the evil at the longhouse's steps and not let it proceed to enter. Therefore, a *miring* ceremony was organised at the front steps of the longhouse to prevent Covid-19 from entering the longhouse. That is how we protect our longhouse."

This account illustrates how the Ibans interpret and respond to threats through the lens of spectral thinking. By performing the *miring* ceremony, they engage in a form of spectral communication aimed at protecting their community from harm. This ritual underscores the interconnectedness between the human and spiritual realms, as well as the influence of spectral entities on human actions and wellbeing.

The *miring* ceremony described by Daud resonates with Deumert's (2022) assertion that spectral thinking is embedded in everyday life and has significant effects on social behaviour. It also resonates with Hollan's (2020) emphasis on the social, psychological, and political impacts of immaterial entities. Furthermore, Sather's (2001) explanation of the role of spirits in Iban cosmology provides a broader context for understanding why such rituals are necessary and how they function to maintain the health and safety of the community.

Excerpt 5.14

Belayong narrates the circumstances of a person clearing land in Miri who suffered from a persistent skin disease that modern medicine could not cure. The illness was attributed to an unruly spirit stressing the Iban belief in the guardianship of land by spiritual entities. Belayong's narrative aligns with Deumert's (2022) exploration of spectral communication, where unseen forces (spirits) significantly influence social and physical realities (Deumert, 2022, p. 1). The illness is understood not only as a physical ailment but as a manifestation of a spiritual conflict, highlighting the integration of spiritual and physical worlds in Iban cosmology.

Belayong's role as a *lemambang* is important to resolving the conflict. When consulted, he performs the *miring* to seek the spirit's forgiveness. This ceremony involves specific rituals such as sacrificing chickens and offering chants, which are integral to appease the spirit. According to Sather (2001), the *lemambang*'s role is crucial in conducting such rituals, serving as a mediator between humans and spirits (Sather, 2001, p. 50). Belayong's narrative reflects this mediatory role, where his expertise and willingness to perform the ritual are important for healing.

Belayong's involvement in the *miring* also highlights the importance of intergenerational knowledge transmission. Belayong, representing the younger generation, took up the responsibility as his elders were not strong enough for the task. This reflects the apprenticeship system described by Sutlive & Sutlive (2001), where younger Ibans learn from their elders, ensuring the continuity of ritual knowledge and practices (Sutlive & Sutlive, 2001, p. 120).

The successful outcome of the *miring* ceremony, where the person was healed within two weeks, demonstrates the efficacy of traditional practices of the Ibans. Belayong's narrative challenges the hegemony of modern medical approaches by highlighting the validity and effectiveness of traditional healing practices.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Daud and Belayong’s narratives exemplify how the Ibans negotiate their way of living with their spirit world in handling sickness as part of their social realities. Belayong says the *miring* involves various aspects of spectral communication. The chants, sacrifices, and offerings are ritualistic acts and forms of communication with the spirit world. Deumert (2022) argues that such practices transcend conventional linguistic boundaries, incorporating sensory

and affective dimensions essential for effective communication with spirits (Deumert, 2022, p. 2).

5.4 Spiritual pantheon, ghosts, and spirits

The Iban spiritual pantheon is a fundamental aspect of the Iban belief system; it consists of various spirits, deities, and entities that play significant roles in their cosmology and daily lives. The Iban engage in communication with not only spirits associated with rice fields, as previously mentioned, but also a distinct range of spiritual entities from their pantheon. In addition, the significance of ghosts lies in their ability to generate impacts, thereby influencing both the continuity and evolution of society. Ghosts influence our capacity to envision potential futures. We are thus not only haunted by past events, but also by historical possibilities and alternative futures that might have unfolded (Gordon 2011, p. 5).

Below, Chendan explains the basic genealogy of the Iban gods important in the *miring* tradition. He starts with the god-king Sempulang Gana, an important deity in the tradition. In the next excerpt, Tajek maintains the importance of *miring* for rice planting but also names Sempulang Gana as the god who resides in the sky, whom she earnestly believes will bless her with bountiful harvest. Like Chendan, Lambat narrates the genealogy of the Iban gods in Excerpt 5.11, adding stories about the gods' relationship with one another. Finally, Radin further explains that the Iban gods are many and have their own unique profiles. Each god caters to different needs and the Iban offer their worship to the god who meets their individual and communal needs. He says that an Iban worshipper communicates with and makes requests to a specific deity.

Excerpt 5.9: Chendan – narration of the Iban spiritual pantheon

> In the beginning, the harvest god, King Sempulang Gana introduces the *miring* to the Ibans. This Sempulang Gana is the brother of Singgalang Burung. Sempulang Gana is in charge of the soil/ land. He is in charge because his wife is the daughter of King Sema Rugak who is the God of soil/ land. Sema Rugak gave his son in law to keep charge over soil/land and in effect, Sempulang Gana has powers over crops and agriculture. That is why the Ibans who depended on rice planting worshipped Sempulang Gana to receive bountiful harvests. The way we worship, we perform the *miring*. Using sacrifices. Sacrifices can be a chicken or a pig. That is why we Ibans know how to perform the *miring*. We received the knowledge from Sempulang Gana (God of harvest). Therefore, since you are recording this, I would like to tell you that

from the Saribas riverine, we have 21 different types of offerings.
Why do we call them? Firstly, we are to inform you that we are having the *Gawai*. Secondly, we seek for their help and assistance to better our lives. We also seek good health, good wealth and prosperity in our worldly living. That is why the Ibans are dependent on the *miring*. We need it to summon our gods and ancestors to aid us in living. There are no other reasons that we have the *miring*. If you called for them without any reasons and offerings, how are we to invite them? It is similar to inviting visitors to our home but we offer them no hospitality.

Excerpt 5.10: Tajek – description of praying to the God of Harvest

If we perform the *miring* for paddy planting, we offer our *'piring'* or food offerings to the God Sempulang Gana. We asked Sempulang Gana to give his favours to our harvest, our health as we labour in our paddy fields and we also seek for his protection so that the animals would not destroy our paddy. We placed our food offerings to Sempulang Gana nearby our paddy fields.
L: Who is Sempulang Gana to you Older Mother?
T: I believed he is God. According to our belief, he is God. He resides in the sky.

Excerpt 5.11: Lambat – genealogy of the Iban gods

We call first for Semerugah because he is the eldest child of King Durung. And, being the eldest, Semerugah is to take charge of the land and soil. Singalang Burung is to bring trophy heads (god of war). The next brother is Sempulang Gana, who is brings foods and fruits. Apai Aloi, another sibling inherited the *lupung* or the shamanic satchel and is in charge of healings. Their brother Ribai left to go across the seas.And, Uchung takes care of the skies. The Ibans are descended from Singgalang Burung, the father of Keling the father of Gundi.
Next, the Iban will start to prepare for a few sets of food trays for the gods. The first set is prepared especially for Semerugah the King of the soil. The Iban believes that he is the god of the earth, especially in terms of farming.
Yes. The 'rice' or 'paddy' does not know how to pray, it does not know about prayers. Sempulang Gana is in charge of paddy. We call first for Semerugah because he is the eldest child of King Durung. And, being the eldest, Semerugah is to take charge of the land and soil. Singalang Burung is to bring trophy heads (god of war). The next brother is Sempulang Gana, who brings foods and fruits. Apai Aloi, another sibling inherited the *lupung* or the shamanic satchel and is in charge of healings. Their brother Ribai left to go across the seas.And, Uchung takes care of the skies. The Ibans are descended from Singgalang Burung, the father of Keling the father of Gundi.

Excerpt 5.12: Radin – views on relevant gods

R: and back to our reason for asking, or request from the deities,

L: yes

R: …the function of the *miring* is very specific, we organise our *miring* ceremony to meet our specific needs and address the gods concerned.
L: yes
R: for example, you know that we do the *miring* ceremonies for many reasons. If you want to ask for prosperity, you refer to this particular god, if you are asking for good health or healing, you refer to this god. For example, if you want good fortune, your *miring* should address Singalang Burung.
L: yes
R:…asking him for help, for more blessings especially during significant festivals.
…believe in the gods, and Lut, we have numerous gods, so many types. We worship our gods, and it is our way of expressing our intentions, or request for something from these gods. We communicate and asked for certain things from these gods, and communicate with gods , deities and spirits, ..or to our dead ancestors.
R: …the function of the *miring* is very specific, we organise our *miring* ceremony to meet our specific needs and address the gods concerned. For example, you know that we do the *miring* ceremonies for many reasons. If you want to ask for prosperity, you refer to this particular god, if you are asking for good health or, healing, you refer to this god.For example: if you want good fortune, your *miring* should address Singalang Burung asking him for help, for more blessings especially during significant festivals.
If you are in agriculture, your *miring* and incantations should invoke the god of agriculture, Sempulang Gana.
If you are seeking healing, Lut, your *miring* and incantations should address grandmother Anda or, grandmother Andan. They have 'cooling' remedies so that you will be healed from your sickness.If you are seeking good luck, and good fortune, you can also address your *miring* and incantations to invoke Anda Mara.
L: Who is Anda Mara, again?Anda Mara can give good fortune.
L: not power? Did you refer to power instead?
R: yes, that too.
Therefore, if a couple gets married and decided to have children, their *miring* and incantations must invoke the related deity.
Also, when our ancestors went to war,
L: yes
R: they will prepare their *miring* to invoke the warrior deities living in the spirit realm,
L: the god war and his warriors?
R: yes, god of war.

5.4.1 Analysis and discussion

My research integrates the theoretical framework of spectral thinking with empirical data to explore the significance of the Iban spiritual pantheon and their practices of spectral communication. The concept of spectral thinking, as articulated by Deumert (2022), posits that the dead are not merely material remains but possess agency that continues to shape the present and future. This perspective encourages us to consider the broader implications and effects of

spectral entities on social, psychological, and political aspects of human life. Hollan (2020) reinforces this idea by emphasising that ghosts and other spiritual beings, although immaterial, have significant impacts on the human world and behavioural environment. As Hollan states, "ghosts have returned to anthropology" because they continue to have profound social, psychological, and political effects, despite their immaterial nature.

In the context of the Iban community, the spiritual pantheon consists of various gods, spirits, and ancestors that play significant roles in their cosmology and daily lives. These entities are not only revered but are actively engaged through rituals and offerings, underscoring the Iban belief in their ongoing influence. The Ibans refer to these entities as *betara* or *petara* (gods), who are seen as supernatural beings with kind intentions, and *antu* (ghosts), which include malevolent spirits (Wadley, 1999).

Excerpt 5.9

In the context of Iban spirituality, Chendan's narrative provides a clear example of how the dead and other spiritual beings maintain a presence in the lives of the living. He explains the genealogy and significance of the Iban gods, particularly King Sempulang Gana, the harvest god. Chendan states, "In the beginning, the harvest god, King Sempulang Gana introduces the *miring* to the Ibans... We need it to summon our gods and ancestors to aid us in living." This underscores the importance of these rituals in maintaining a connection with the spiritual realm, seeking blessings for good health, prosperity, and overall wellbeing.

Chendan's detailed explanation of *miring* ceremonies involve offerings and sacrifices, such as chickens or pigs, to honour and appease the gods and ancestors. Chendan elaborates, "We received the knowledge from Sempulang Gana (God of harvest). Therefore, since you are recording this, I would like to tell you that from the Saribas riverine, we have 21 different types of offerings." This statement illustrates the deep-seated tradition of engaging with spectral entities through ritualistic practices, reflecting the continuity of these beliefs across generations.

Reed Wadley (1999) supports this view by noting that the Iban term for gods, *betara* or *petara*, encompasses both benevolent supernatural entities and ancestors with cosmic attributes. This duality highlights the complex nature of Iban spirituality, where the departed *antu* play a crucial role in the community's daily life and rituals. The Iban's practice of performing *miring* to seek

help and guidance from these spiritual entities demonstrates their belief in the ongoing influence of the dead on the living.

In addition, Chendan emphasises that there are specific reasons for performing the *miring*. The Ibans engage in *miring* to seek assistance, good health, and prosperity and in their worldly lives. This reflects a belief in the power of communication with the spiritual world to improve their wellbeing and livelihoods. It serves as a formal invitation to the gods and ancestors and is accompanied by offerings. Chendan draws parallels between inviting visitors to one's home and summoning spiritual entities through *miring* ceremonies. He suggests that just as hospitality is extended to guests, offerings are made to honour and welcome the gods and ancestors into the human realm. This analogy underscores the cultural norms of respect and reciprocity that govern spectral communication within the Iban community.

Chendan's account further aligns with Hollan's (2020) observation that cultural forms and social support are essential for expressing and making sense of spectral encounters. The Iban's structured approach to *miring*, with specific offerings and rituals, provides a framework for interacting with the spiritual realm, ensuring that these encounters are meaningful and culturally resonant.

Excerpt 5.10

Tajek's narrative clearly illustrates this dynamic. She explains, "If we perform the *miring* for paddy planting, we offer our *piring* or food offerings to the God Sempulang Gana. We asked Sempulang Gana to give his favours to our harvest, our health as we labour in our paddy fields, and we also seek for his protection so that the animals would not destroy our paddy." This statement reflects the belief that Sempulang Gana, a spectral entity, directly influences the success of their agricultural activities and overall wellbeing. The act of offering food near the paddy fields as a form of communication underscores the interplay between the living and the spiritual realms. Tajek demonstrates that *miring* rituals serve as a form of communication with the spiritual realm, specifically with Sempulang Gana. The offerings and invocations made during *miring* ceremonies are a means of establishing a connection with this deity, seeking divine intervention, blessings, and protection for the agricultural endeavours. The act of placing food offerings near the paddy fields is symbolic of this communication.

Tajek believes in Sempulang Gana's divine presence. She asserts, "I believed he is God. According to our belief, he is God. He resides in the sky." This indicates that the Iban do not

merely remember their gods and ancestors but actively engage with them, seeking their guidance and protection through rituals like the *miring*.

Reed Wadley's (1999) observation that *petara* are seen as ancestors with cosmic attributes aligns with Tajek's account. The Iban's practice of performing *miring* ceremonies to invoke Sempulang Gana highlights how these spectral entities are woven into their social and material worlds. The belief that Sempulang Gana can protect their crops from animals and ensure a bountiful harvest demonstrates the tangible influence these spiritual beings have on daily life.

Hollan's (2020) notion that cultural forms and social support are essential for expressing and understanding spectral encounters is evident in Tajek's narrative. The structured approach to *miring*, involving specific offerings and prayers, provides a culturally resonant framework for engaging with the spiritual realm. This ritualistic practice ensures that the Iban community can express their reverence and seek the aid of their gods in a meaningful way.

Tajek's belief that Sempulang Gana is a god reflects the spiritual identity of the Iban community. Such beliefs are integral to their cultural and religious framework. A sociolinguistics of the spectre adds depth to the analysis by emphasising how linguistic practices, such as chants and invocations during *miring* rituals, are instrumental in maintaining and expressing this spiritual identity. Tajek's narrative highlights the performative aspect of *miring* rituals, which involve not only spoken words but also actions, offerings, and symbolic gestures. This perspective highlights how language and communication play a central role in the enactment of cultural traditions and beliefs.

Excerpt 5.11

Lambat's narrative provides empirical support for these theoretical claims. He explains the genealogy of the Iban gods and their respective domains: "We call first for Semerugah because he is the eldest child of King Durung. And being the eldest, Semerugah is to take charge of the land and soil. Singalang Burung is to bring trophy heads (God of war). The next brother is Sempulang Gana, who brings foods and fruits. Apai Aloi, another sibling, inherited the lupung or the shamanic satchel and is in charge of healings." This detailed account reflects how these spectral entities are deeply embedded in Iban cosmology and daily life. In addition, Lambat echoes Chendan's explanation of the hierarchical structure of ancestral gods within Iban cosmology. He describes the roles and responsibilities of Semerugah, Singalang Burung, Sempulang Gana, Apai Aloi, and Uchung, emphasising their divine governance over different

aspects of the natural and spiritual realms. He states, "The first set [*piring*] is prepared especially for Semerugah the King of the soil. The Iban believes that he is the god of the earth, especially in terms of farming." This illustrates how the Iban people perform rituals to honour and invoke the gods, seeking their blessings for agricultural success. Such practices underscore the interconnectedness between the Iban community and their spectral world.

Like Chendan, Lambat traces the lineage of the Ibans back to Singgalang Burung, emphasising the continuity of ancestral beliefs and practices across generations. This highlights the cultural heritage and identity of the Iban community, rooted in the spiritual worldview and traditions passed down from their ancestors. Lambat's narrative reflects the intergenerational transmission of knowledge and rituals related to spectral communication and spectral thinking, underscoring the enduring relevance of ancestral beliefs in contemporary Iban society.

This hierarchical framework underscores the belief in a structured spiritual hierarchy and the importance of each deity's role in maintaining cosmic order and the Iban's practice of preparing food trays and performing rituals for these gods highlights the continuous interaction between the living and the spectral realms. The belief that these gods influence essential aspects of life, such as farming, emphasises their ongoing agency and presence in Iban culture.

Hollan's (2020) concept that ghosts, and spiritual beings need proper cultural forms and social support to express their influence is evident in Lambat's account. The structured approach to rituals, involving specific offerings and prayers, provides a culturally resonant framework for engaging with the spectral realm. This ritualistic practice ensures that the Iban community can express their reverence and seek the aid of their gods in a meaningful way.

Overall, Lambat's explanation of the Iban spiritual pantheon reflects a deep sense of cultural identity and heritage. He provides insights into the lineage and roles of these deities, reinforcing the cultural significance of these beliefs within the Iban community.

Excerpt 5.12

Radin's narrative provides empirical support for these theoretical claims. He explains the specific roles of various gods and spirits in the Iban belief system and how these entities are invoked during *miring* ceremonies: "The function of the *miring* is very specific, we organise our *miring* ceremony to meet our specific needs and address the gods concerned." This detailed

account reflects how these spectral entities are deeply embedded in Iban cosmology and daily life.

Spectral thinking is integral to understanding Iban beliefs is further reinforced by Radin's description of ritual practices. He states, "For example, if you want good fortune, your *miring* should address Singalang Burung asking him for help, for more blessings especially during significant festivals. If you are in agriculture, your *miring* and incantations should invoke the god of agriculture, Sempulang Gana." This illustrates how the Iban people perform rituals to honour and invoke the gods, seeking their blessings for various aspects of life. Such practices underscore the interconnectedness between the Iban community and their spectral world.

Reed Wadley's (1999) observation that *petara* are seen as ancestors with cosmic attributes resonates with Radin's narrative. The Iban's practice of performing *miring* ceremonies to address specific needs, whether for prosperity, health, or protection, highlights the continuous interaction between the living and the spectral realms. The belief that these gods influence essential aspects of life emphasises their ongoing agency and presence in Iban culture.

Hollan's (2020) concept that ghosts and spiritual beings need proper cultural forms and social support to express their influence is evident in Radin's account. The structured approach to rituals, involving specific offerings and prayers, provides a culturally resonant framework for engaging with the spectral realm. This ritualistic practice ensures that the Iban community can express their reverence and seek the aid of their gods in a meaningful way.

Adopting the sociolinguistics of the spectre enables a deeper understanding of the Iban spiritual pantheon and its role in the Iban community's ritual landscape. Radin acknowledges that the gods have been important to the Ibans since the old days. He understands that the Ibans relied on their gods for their way of life. He adds that the relationship between gods and worshippers is personal. If experiences with any of the gods made sense to an Iban worshipper and his way of life, the Iban would continue to make offerings to the gods that relate to him the most.

For all this worship and communication with the gods and deities, a *miring* ceremony is needed. Radin further elaborates that when performing the *miring* ceremony, the gods are invoked with certain chants. He is confident that the correctly summoned deity would be able to respond to each worshipper's request. Several important deities require the offering of a sacrifice, which he says is usually a pig. Radin's narrative highlights how spectral communication is a central aspect of Iban interaction with their spiritual pantheon. The Ibans communicate not only with

spirits associated with specific domains such as rice fields, but with a varied array of spiritual entities from their pantheon. This communication involves rituals, chants, and practices aimed at establishing a connection.

Radin further explains that *miring* ceremonies serve very specific purposes within the Iban spiritual belief system. They are organised to meet the specific needs of the community and to address the gods or deities relevant to those needs. Like Chendan, Radin elaborates on the various reasons for conducting *miring* ceremonies. Each purpose requires invoking a specific god or deity associated with that aspect of life. This demonstrates the nuanced nature of Iban spirituality and how communication with the spiritual realm is tailored to meet different needs.

Radin further mentions the Iban tradition of belief in numerous gods and deities. This polytheistic belief system allows for invoking a wide array of spiritual entities based on the specific requirements of the community or individuals. The gods are considered intermediaries through which the Ibans express their intentions and requests. The *miring* ceremonies are a means of communication with the gods, deities, and spirits as well as with their deceased ancestors. This communication is a central aspect of Iban spirituality and used to convey intentions and requests for various aspects of life. Radin's explanation of *miring* showcases how language and ritual are intricately linked to the preservation of cultural traditions and the maintenance of a harmonious relationship between the living and the spiritual world.

Conclusion

In conclusion, my participants' narratives, and interpretations reflect that the Iban practice of engaging with their spiritual pantheon through rituals and offerings is a vital aspect of their spectral communication. This analysis underscores the importance of spectral thinking in understanding Iban beliefs and highlights the profound interplay between human actions and spectral influences in shaping their social reality. By examining how the Ibans use these rituals to interact with and appease their gods, we gain a deeper appreciation of the cultural significance of spectral entities and their impact on everyday life.

Chapter summary

In summary, in this chapter, my research participants' narratives identify dreams as portals for divine communication, animals serving as messengers and carrying omens and countering unruly spirits. Deumert (2022, p. 4) suggests that spectral thinking unsettles traditional notions of sovereign agency and emphasises our interconnectedness with the social and material world, encompassing past, present, and future, and the influences of other-than-human voices and actions. For the Ibans, dreams, animal signs and interpreting animal offal and countering unruly spirits are crucial aspects through which the dead communicate with the living, conveying messages from gods, ancestors and spirits (Sutlive, 1991). This highlights how spectral communication bridges the human and spiritual realms, serving as a reliable means of interaction with the spiritual world (Sutlive & Sutlive, 2001).

In the next chapter, I will discuss findings and discussions on ritual manifestations of spectral communication.

Chapter Six: Ritual Manifestations of spectral communication.

"…let's say if we plant paddy, we make sure that we plant black glutinous rice, red glutinous rice and the usual (plain) glutinous rice. I planted at least three to four types of glutinous rice, so I won't resort to asking other people when I need them for the piring." Tajek

Introduction

The m*iring* ritual serves as a powerful conduit for human expression, providing platforms through which the Iban engage with the supernatural and communicate with the spectral realm. Spectral communication through *miring* manifests in multiple forms, weaving together language and spiritual symbolism. This chapter embarks into the heart of ritual manifestations of spectral communication, exploring the many ways in which the Iban harness rituals to bridge the gap between visible and invisible worlds. At its core, the *miring* ritual serves as a transformative medium through which the Ibans commune with the divine, invoke ancestral spirits, and establish reciprocal relationships with the spectral realm.

This chapter begins by examining participants' narratives related to rice planting, welcoming guests, *Gawai Dayak*, the Iban longhouse, *piring* (food offerings) and conflict resolution through *kelam ai* (trial by water).

6.1 Rice planting

Iban interactions with the spirits during rice planting rituals represent a form of communication that extends beyond conventional human-to-human interaction. This form of communication is pivotal in understanding the fabric of communities where such beliefs are prevalent. It is not only a medium for success in agriculture, but also a means of reinforcing social cohesion, cultural continuity, and communal identity.

In this section, I explore the spectral resonance of the Iban rice planting rituals. This resonance is informed by Deumert's (2022) insights into conversation beyond the human and enriched by Wadley's (1999) sociolinguistics perspective. My findings underscore the pivotal role of these rituals in organising and reorganising Iban community structures and social values. It is clear that Iban rituals go beyond mere beliefs, fostering a deep connection between language, culture, and social organisation – a connection that ensures the perpetuation of their unique tapestry of spectral sociolinguistics.

The following photographs and two excerpts are related to *miring* rituals for rice planting.

Photograph 6.1–6.2: Iban farmers have small commercial crops or plantations, such as for palm oil and fishing.

Photograph 6.3: A harvest of peppers drying outside a longhouse

In the broader context of rice planting and agricultural practices, *miring* rituals also reflect the Iban ecological worldview and their reverence for the natural environment. By invoking the gods and spirits through *miring*, the Ibans express their gratitude to the land and water for sustaining their livelihoods while also affirming their commitment to ecological stewardship and sustainable land management practices. The ritual manifestation of *miring* in the context of rice planting and agricultural endeavours thus embodies a holistic understanding of spirituality, community, and environmental sustainability. By acknowledging the significance of *miring* in Iban culture, researchers can gain deeper insights into the intricate interplay between ritual practices, cultural beliefs, and ecological dynamics in Iban agricultural practices. The following excerpts reveal more about Iban perspectives on *miring*, rice planting, and other agricultural endeavours.

Excerpt 6.1: Tajek – on *miring*

T: Just the old ways, old tradition. I had followed the belief of our ancestors and that is the *miring*. In the old ways, when it was planting time, we performed the *miring*. When we harvest, we do the *miring*. We begin doing anything with the *miring* first. The children, before we send them to school, we will perform the *miring*. I mean, we send them to school, but if they are not smart, it is just unfortunate for them. You have seen my family and you know me.

L: Therefore you plant paddy and you perform the *miring* so that you can send your children to school?
T: Yes, So that my children do not have to eat Siamese rice. And I sell my own rice to provide for the children's schooling. That is why I practised *miring*.

Excerpt 6.2: Daud – on *miring*

Meanwhile, in the longhouse, our grandparents will have the *miring* for every important occasion. All sorts of occasions. For starting the paddy planting season, for example, we must hold the *miring*. Late father used to have *miring* ceremonies if there were omens brought by birds with regards to our paddy farm.

Excerpt 6.3: Chendan – on *miring*

Secondly, every year we plant paddy and we seek bountiful harvest from Sempulang Gana (God of harvest). Therefore, we offer him the *piring*, or food offerings. Thirdly, if you have fallen sick, you will need the healing ritual. You would seek help from the healing god and ancestors if the hospital could not heal you. And for this ritual, you will have to perform the *miring*. That is why, this very complimenting for our (Iban) way of living.

Excerpt 6.4: Belayong – on *miring*

If you have the *miring*, you will be fine. However, some people (Iban) chose to be ignorant and avoid the *miring* for the land guardians. If you hold the Christian belief, I am sorry to have said this; many people just use their prayers, but it would not work. At least from what I have seen. At last, they will come back to the *miring* for appeasing these land guardians. If you plan to cultivate a land, and the land has a guardian, for example if you plan to cultivate palm oils and the land has no guardian, then it is okay, you would not suffer from bad consequences. But if the land has a guardian, or 'owner', you have to have the *miring* ceremony for it.
"*We are opening this world, we would cultivate it, we would harvest it, we would plant, and if you spirits are here, and this is your land, and this is your home, we seek your forgiveness and we offer to you this miring, it is an offering in return for your forgiveness."*
So, the chant can be very brief, as long as you acknowledge them with a *miring* ceremony.
If you offer only prayers and there is no miring, it would not be effective. I have witnessed this before.

6.1.1 Analysis and discussion

Excerpts 6.1 and 6.2

Both Tajek and Daud associate *miring* with the rice planting season, among other things. Tajek indicates that the *miring* is an ancestral tradition, of which she had been an earnest follower. She adds that it holds profound significance and provides a foundation for everything they do. Similarly, Daud recalls how the elder generation routinely had the *miring* for every significant event in the longhouse while he was growing up. He states that the *miring* is observed on various occasions and his predecessors (including his father) associated the *miring* with the wellbeing of their rice cultivation.

Deumert (2018, 2022) advocates for recognition of forms of communication that extend beyond human interaction. As exemplified in their engagement with the spirits associated with rice fields, the Ibans offer a compelling example of this perspective. Their interactions with spiritual entities enhance the prospects of a successful harvest. But, more importantly, they reinforce their cultural values and social cohesion. Within the context of rice planting, the *miring* practices hold a paramount significance.

Both Tajek and Daud talk about the generational practice of *miring* by recalling that the tradition was 'there' when growing up in the longhouse. They associated it with the rice planting season, since rice was the main staple of the Iban diet. As highlighted by Tajek and Daud, the timing of *miring* is closely associated with the rice planting season – a period of immense importance in the Iban calendar. Derek Freeman (2004, p. 153) reports that the Iban way of life, a subsistence economy, depended on the cultivation of hill rice. He observes that individual Iban families produce their own crop of rice and mentions that "to the Iban, the growing of *padi* is a ritual undertaking, and their whole system of agriculture is based on an elaborate fertility cult". As the primary staple of their diet, rice underpins not only their subsistence but also their entire way of life.

While Tajek notes that *miring* occurred before the planting, Daud adds that the timing of *miring* may be attributable to the presence of omens warning about the health of the crop. The timing and reasons for *miring* in these instances around rice planting are important. With Sarawak having the highest levels of poverty since Independence (Echoh et al. 2017), surplus rice is sold to purchase many other basic commodities or to meet needs, such as food, fuel, and even

to support children's education (Ugih 2014). Ugih (2014) observes that recent threats to rice cultivation from modernisation and rapid development have meant a lack of food security for the people of Sarawak. This may explain some of the significance the participants place on the *miring* and their rice crops. Iban agricultural rituals, especially those around rice planting, highlight the intersection of language, ritual, and ecology. These rituals are not merely about ensuring a bountiful harvest; they are a means of expressing and negotiating relationships within the community and with the environment.

Excerpt 6.3

Chendan's account adds value to the cultural significance of *miring* rituals within the Iban community and mentions three specific contexts where *miring* is practised: when planting paddy for a bountiful harvest, when offering food to Sempulang Gana, and when seeking healing from illness. Chendan says these rituals are deeply rooted in the Iban way of life, reflecting the community's cultural values and beliefs. When planting paddy, offerings to Sempulang Gana represent an act of communication with the God of Harvest, seeking his favour for a fruitful crop. Similarly, when seeking healing, *miring* is performed to communicate with the healing god and ancestors.

These rituals entail performative elements that bridge the gap between the human and supernatural worlds. Chendan's explanation highlights the dual nature of *miring* rituals. On one hand, they serve spiritual functions by connecting with deities and ancestors for blessings and healing. On the other hand, they have practical significance, such as ensuring a good harvest or seeking healing when medical treatment is insufficient. This dual functionality showcases how sociolinguistic practices can address both spiritual and pragmatic needs within the community. Chendan's concluding remark about *miring* being "complementary for our (Iban) way of life" underscores the role of these rituals in fostering community cohesion and cultural continuity. *Miring* rituals not only connect individuals with the spiritual realm, but also reinforce a shared cultural identity and way of life among the Iban people.

Excerpt 6.4

Belayong's narrative describes *miring* in the context of appeasing land guardians. He highlights the belief that *miring* is essential for seeking forgiveness from these guardians when cultivating land. *Miring* is portrayed as a customary practice deeply ingrained in the Iban way of life, reflecting their spiritual connection to the land. From Belayong's account, we can recognise

that *miring* rituals involve a form of communication with the spiritual realm, specifically with the land guardians or spirits. The *miring* ceremony is seen as a means to establish a connection with these guardians, acknowledge their presence, and seek their forgiveness and blessings for land cultivation. This communication is not solely verbal but also ritualistic, involving offerings and symbolic gestures.

Belayong mentions the influence of Christian beliefs among some Iban people and their preference for prayer over *miring*. This illustrates the complex interplay between religion and traditional practices. While some individuals opt for Christian prayers, others still adhere to *miring* rituals. Belayong's observation that prayers alone without *miring* may not be effective in appeasing land guardians' points to the perceived efficacy of *miring* rituals. This belief in the effectiveness of *miring* rituals speaks to the importance of these practices within the Iban community. The act of performing *miring* ceremonies for land cultivation signifies a commitment to preserving cultural identity and maintaining a harmonious relationship with the environment and spiritual entities. *Miring* serves as a means to assert the Iban cultural values and beliefs associated with the land.

Belayong's interview excerpt offers valuable insights into *miring* rituals within the Iban community, particularly in relation to land guardians. Spectral communication emphasises the spiritual dimensions of these rituals, acknowledging the interplay between religious beliefs and traditions as well as highlighting the enduring significance of *miring* practices in maintaining cultural identity and ensuring a harmonious connection with the spiritual realm.

Conclusion

In summary, the findings discussed in this section shed light on the profound sociolinguistic dimensions of Iban rituals, particularly the *miring* practices connected with rice planting. These rituals serve as essential elements in the organisation and reorganisation of the Iban community. Their significance extends beyond mere religious ceremonies to encompass the preservation of cultural values, social cohesion, and the very essence of the Iban way of life. Intricately linked with rice planting, the *miring* practices emerge as pivotal elements in the organisation and reorganisation of the Iban community and its social values.

6.2 Welcoming guests during weddings

In Iban culture, the act of welcoming guests is not merely a social gesture, but also a spiritual ritual. Through the *miring* ritual, the Ibans invite the presence of ancestral spirits and divine entities to join the feast. The welcoming of guests serves as a tangible manifestation of the interconnectedness between the visible and invisible realms. Another ritual manifestation is through weddings, as Iban wedding ceremonies are deeply rooted in spiritual beliefs and rituals that facilitate spectral communication. The research participants share about witnessing *miring* rituals for welcoming guests during weddings. In Excerpts 6.5, 6.6, 6.7, and 6.8 below, Daud, Lindong, Chendan and Radin describe their experiences with *miring*.

Photograph 6.4: Guests from the bride's longhouse are welcomed with rice wine offered at every *bilek* before being seated near the wedding aisle

Photograph 6.5: Wedding guests in an Iban longhouse

Excerpt 6.5: Daud – *miring* is about showing hospitality

> Other experiences on *miring*. I am very well versed with *miring* practices. Either I am a guest or a host, *miring* is a must to show hospitality. That is the way for our longhouses in Saratok. When we run campaigns for our political parties during elections, the longhouse people know that I am a *lemambang* (bard), and they will ask me to perform the *miring*. They were always ready with the *miring* offerings, and they will let me perform the invocations of the gods.

Excerpt 6.6: Lindong – associates *miring* with weddings

> …but, before that, before I was a Catholic in my younger days, I joined *miring* for example, when there is a bad omen, bad omen in our lives, you know, in the longhouse and wedding ceremony, *ngambi indu* (fetching the bride), I will also attend, but not always, then to welcome the honourable VIPs (usually politicians) visitors, nyambut *temuai* (welcoming guests). That's why sometimes we do the *miring*, and the last one I mentioned just now, *mangkung tiang*, or house blessing, I think it's '19, in 2019 if I'm not mistaken.

Excerpt 6.7: Chendan – associates *miring* with weddings

> For many reasons. For weddings, we have *miring* to welcome the guests. If an Iban wants to welcome his bride, the miring must be performed on the ground to rid of bad spirits. Just in case the bride carries bad omen into her new longhouse. The *miring* helps to ground the evil spirit preventing it from entering the longhouse. So, to invite an important person such as a minister, we performed the *miring* to welcome them to the longhouse. We performed the *miring* on the ground to stop anything with bad intention from entering the longhouse.

Excerpt 6.8: Radin – associates *miring* with weddings

> Let me start with this. In the past, if anyone gets married, the Iban way to arrange a marriage is according to the ways and customs of the Ibans. Therefore, the *miring* practice cannot be avoided.

6.2.1 Analysis and discussion

Deumert (2022) posits that the sociolinguistics of spectres acknowledges the sensuous and affective nature of social life, rejecting the "boundaries, binaries, and demarcations" inherent in the temporal "linearity of modernity" (Garuba, 2013, in Deumert 2022, p.1). Hollan (2020) underscores that ghosts and spirits, considered ontologically "real" by the people studied, are highly social and knowable. Although typically invisible, they often manifest in practices and rituals, where they can be interacted with directly.

Excerpt 6.5

Daud's account highlights the importance of *miring* as a practice rooted in hospitality and community cohesion. He states, "I am very well versed with *miring* practices. Either I am a guest or a host, *miring* is a must to show hospitality. That is the way for our longhouses in Saratok. When we run campaigns for our political parties during elections, the longhouse people know that I am a *lemambang*, and they will ask me to perform the *miring*. They were always ready with the *miring* offerings, and they will let me perform the invocations of the gods." This underscores the role of *miring* in maintaining social bonds and demonstrates how spectral practices are embedded in everyday social interactions.

The concept of spectral thinking challenges the idea of sovereign agency by highlighting how non-human voices and actions, such as those of spirits and ancestors, influence human behaviours. Daud's experience exemplifies this, as his role as a *lemambang* during political campaigns was not only a personal choice but also a response to communal expectations and spectral traditions. His agency was guided by the community's needs and the expectations of the spirits.

Daud's narrative showcases how the Ibans draw on a wide array of semiotic resources, such as rituals, to challenge the hegemony of standardised notions of agency and identity. By

incorporating spectral communication into their social practices, the Ibans maintain a fluid and dynamic understanding of agency that transcends human-centric perspectives.

Daud's narrative supports the claim that these practices are essential mediums for interaction with the spiritual realm, guiding individual roles and reinforcing cultural continuity. This analysis underscores the significance of spectral thinking in understanding Iban beliefs, highlighting the intricate interplay between human and non-human agency in shaping their social reality.

Excerpt 6.6

Lindong's narrative highlights the centrality of *miring* in fostering hospitality and community cohesion. By participating in *miring* rituals for various events such as weddings, welcoming guests, and house blessings, Lindong underscores how these practices serve to maintain social bonds and express communal values. This aligns with Deumert's (2022) notion that social life is deeply affective and interconnected, with rituals like *miring* facilitating these connections.

The concept of spectral thinking challenges the idea of sovereign agency by highlighting how non-human voices and actions, such as those of spirits and ancestors, influence human behaviour. Lindong's experience exemplifies this, as his involvement in *miring* was not only a personal choice but also a response to communal expectations and spectral traditions. His actions were guided by the community's needs and the expectations of the spirits, demonstrating the fluidity of agency as proposed by Deumert.

Lindong's account also showcases how the Ibans draw on a wide array of semiotic resources, such as rituals, to challenge standardised notions of agency and identity. By incorporating spectral communication into their social practices, the Ibans maintain a dynamic understanding of agency that transcends human-centric perspectives. This is evident when Lindong mentions participating in *miring* for various communal events, emphasising the role of these rituals in shaping social interactions and community identity.

Excerpt 6.7

The concept of spectral communication becomes apparent in Chendan's explanation of *miring*, which he describes as a protective measure against bad spirits that might accompany a bride into her new longhouse or attempt to enter the longhouse when welcoming an important person.

This aspect of *miring* involves communication with the supernatural realm, seeking to ward off malevolent forces. Moreover, the choice to perform *miring* rituals on the ground is significant. The decision is not merely practical but also symbolic, emphasising the connection between the ritual and the earth. In Iban culture, the ground is often seen as a conduit between earthly and spiritual realms. Performing *miring* on the ground can thus be seen as a form of spectral communication through use of the earth as an intermediary space.

Chendan's account describes the multifaceted role of *miring* in Iban culture, stating, "For many reasons. For weddings, we have *miring* to welcome the guests. If an Iban wants to welcome his bride, the *miring* must be performed on the ground to rid of bad spirits. Just in case the bride carries bad omen into her new longhouse. The *miring* helps to ground the evil spirit preventing it from entering the longhouse. So, to invite an important person such as a minister, we performed the *miring* to welcome them to the longhouse. We performed the *miring* on the ground to stop anything with bad intention from entering the longhouse."

Chendan's narrative highlights the centrality of *miring* in fostering hospitality and community cohesion. By participating in *miring* rituals for weddings and welcoming guests, Chendan underscores how these practices serve to maintain social bonds and express communal values.

The concept of spectral thinking challenges the idea of sovereign agency by highlighting how non-human voices and actions, such as those of spirits and ancestors, influence human behaviour. Chendan's experience exemplifies this, as his involvement in *miring* was not only a personal choice but also a response to communal expectations and spectral traditions. His actions were guided by the community's needs and the expectations of the spirits, demonstrating the fluidity of agency as proposed by Deumert.

Chendan's account also showcases how the Ibans draw on a wide array of semiotic resources, such as rituals, to challenge standardised notions of agency and identity. By incorporating spectral communication into their social practices, the Ibans maintain a dynamic understanding of agency that transcends human-centric perspectives. This is evident when Chendan mentions participating in *miring* for weddings and to welcome important guests, emphasising the role of these rituals in shaping social interactions and community identity.

Excerpt 6.8

Radin's interview illuminates the cultural significance of *miring* within the Iban community, particularly in the context of marriage arrangements. In the past, Ibans arranged marriages in accordance with their traditional customs and practices. As a result, the *miring* practice – an essential aspect of Iban cultural and spiritual traditions – could not be overlooked or disregarded in the process. Buma (1992) mentions that Iban wedding customs known as the *Melah Pinang* can vary from one river region and longhouse to another, yet all share some fundamental procedures. He acknowledges that once both parties from the bride and groom arrive on the chosen wedding date, they then prepare for the wedding. This includes making rice wine, and relatives on the bride's side may arrive a day or two earlier to assist with the preparation. The groom's party usually congregates at a designated location, waiting for guests to arrive before collectively proceeding to the bride's longhouse. Buma adds that contemporary practices can differ, especially among those who have adopted Christianity or another religion (1992, pp. 33–34). *Miring* is therefore depicted as a custom deeply rooted in the Iban community traditions, serving to purify and sanctify important events such as weddings.

As advocated by Deumert (2022), the sociolinguistics of the spectre challenges conventional sociolinguistic boundaries by encouraging us to explore communication that extends beyond human interaction. While Western-oriented traditions have often discounted notions of 'evil spirits' or supernatural entities, adopting a spectral view offers a transformative perspective. Iban wedding customs, which include welcoming guests, provide a prime example of this. Within the Iban community, there is a deep-rooted belief in the influence of spirits and supernatural forces on important life events such as weddings. The role of these spirits, often associated with ancestral presence, is integral to the customs and rituals performed on such occasions. Radin emphasises the cultural significance of *miring* rituals in the context of marriage within the Iban community. These rituals are portrayed as an essential part of the traditional Iban way of arranging marriage.

Conclusion

From Daud, Lindong, Chendan and Radin, we see testimony that *miring* rituals associated with marriage serve a dual purpose. First, they function to communicate with the spiritual realm to seek blessings and protection for the couple. *Miring* often involves invocations and offerings to spirits and deities, emphasising communication with the supernatural in the context of marriage. Radin's mention of arranging marriages according to Iban customs underscores the role of *miring* in preserving cultural traditions. In the face of modernisation and external

influence, these rituals continue to be practised. This reflects the enduring importance of ritual practices in maintaining cultural identity and continuity.

All the participants presented the *miring* as a customary practice. It serves to address bad omens, celebrate important occasions, and welcome honoured guests. Integrating the concept of spectral communication into the analysis, we can consider the presence of the supernatural or spectral elements within *miring* rituals. *Miring* often involves invocations to the gods and spirits, making it a form of communication with the spectral realm. A sociolinguistics of the spectre emphasises how linguistic practices intersect with the spiritual and supernatural aspects of culture. In the context of *miring*, it adds depth to the analysis by acknowledging the coexistence of linguistic communication with beliefs in the supernatural.

6.3 *Gawai Dayak* (harvest festival)

Gawai or the harvest festival, as articulated by Freeman (1953), Kedit (1969), and Jensen (1974) within Kedit's comprehensive work, encompasses the following thematic domains: first, *gawai* rituals that are intrinsically associated with the agricultural aspects of rice cultivation; second, *gawai* ceremonies that are intricately intertwined with the domains of health and longevity; third, *gawai* rituals that pertain to the pursuit of material wealth; and lastly, *gawai* rituals that pertain to the culturally significant practices of headhunting and the attendant acquisition of prestige (Kedit 1993, pp. 18–19). Notwithstanding the broad purview of these categories, it is imperative to emphasise how the focal point of this research is primarily directed toward exploration and analysis of the *Gawai Dayak*, a venerated and emblematic harvest festival within the rich tapestry of Indigenous Dayak culture.

In this analytical discussion, I burrow into the sociolinguistic dimensions of Iban rituals – particularly the *Gawai* – and how a 'spectral' view can transform our understanding of these cultural practices. I integrate insights from Deumert's (2022) argument on interaction beyond the human. Excerpt 6.9 reveals Radin's memories of growing up in the longhouse and association of *miring* with the *Gawai.* In Excerpts 6.10 and 6.11, Chendan and Daud give more input on *miring* and *Gawai*.

Excerpt 6.9: Radin – associates *miring* with *Gawai*

I was born and raised in the longhouse, and growing up in the longhouse, I am used to witnessing the *miring* ceremony. From a very young age, if there is any *miring* ceremony, especially during the harvest festival, I have never missed a *miring* ceremony. I observed the elders performing the *miring*.

Excerpt 6.10: Chendan – associates *miring* with *Gawai.*

We have this celebration to mark our Iban or Dayak identity. It is similar recognition for the Malays in celebrating the Eid, the Chinese in celebrating the Lunar New Year and the Christians in celebrating Christmas or Easter. The prominent Iban leader during the time, our Chief Minister Dato' Stephen Kalong Ningkan and the late Dato' Tra Zehnder based in Kuching requested for the Ibans to be recognised in the Federation of Malaysia. It was approved that for every 1st June from 1965 onwards, *Gawai*, or Harvest festival is the official celebration day for the Ibans. That is why, every Ibans in the longhouse will perform the *miring*. Now I would like to describe how we celebrate *Gawai* in our own longhouse. In our longhouse in Matup, on the eve of *Gawai*, on the 31st May, we have our *miring* in the afternoon. Since 1965 we have been performing our *miring* on the eve of *Gawai* and had never missed any. If it is *Gawai*, *miring* must be performed. Every *Gawai* must be accompanied by the *miring*. From the *miring* we have invocation. In the invocation, we call for our gods. The gods of our grandfathers, the gods of our ancestors and we call for the ancestors themselves. Why do we call them that? Firstly, we are to inform you that we are having the *Gawai*. Secondly, we seek their help and assistance to better our lives. We also seek good health, good wealth and prosperity in our worldly living. That is why the Ibans are dependent on *miring*. We need it to summon our gods and ancestors to aid us in living. There are no other reasons that we have the *miring*. If you called for them without any reasons and offerings, how are we to invite them? It is similar to inviting visitors to our home but we offer them no hospitality.

Excerpt 6.11: Daud – describes *Gawai Dayak*

There are differences. In 1965, the government declared an annual two-day public holiday for the *Gawai*, or harvest celebrations for the Dayaks. And, during the *Gawai*, the *miring* is compulsory. This resulted in many grand celebrations throughout the state. Whoever leads the *Gawai* must perform the *miring*.Even in Kuching we performed the *miring*.Yes, Kuching too. Wherever we have the *Gawai* celebration, we must perform the *miring*. Even the Christians performed the *miring*. In 1988, I chaired the state level *Gawai* committee. It was a big event. All sorts of harvest *miring* were held. We had ours at the Reservoir park. The *Dayaks* took this opportunity to showcase their cultures to the other races in Sarawak and Malaysia as a whole And, in all things, the Ibans will always begin with the *miring*. Again, the Ibans have the *miring* as a foundation in everything they do. Because this was the way we had it from our ancestors.

L: Therefore the objective of the *miring* (in 1988) was to showcase the Iban culture to other races? Iban ways of living?

D: No, I don't mean it exactly that way. I mean more on emphasising the importance of *miring* for the Ibans. *Miring* is the foundation of everything that an Iban does. Therefore, this annual two-day public holiday is an opportunity for us to show others

on how we value our *miring*. And *Gawai* celebrations are not about drinking rice wines and liquors. *Gawai* has *miring* as its main foundation.

6.3.1 Analysis and discussion

Deumert (2022) challenges traditional sociolinguistic boundaries by advocating for a 'spectral' view that includes spiritual entities and deceased individuals in understanding social realities. This perspective aligns with Derrida's (1993) idea of making spectral entities visible in research rather than excluding them. By incorporating this view, we can reevaluate the significance of the *Gawai* festival and its associated rituals, particularly *miring*, within Iban culture. Invocation of the gods during *Gawai* may be perceived as beyond reason and outside the scope of sociolinguistic research. But a 'spectral' view allows us to rethink this perspective. The sociolinguistics of the spectre offers a transformative perspective, challenging the conventional boundaries of sociolinguistic research by encouraging exploration of connections with spiritual entities and deceased individuals. In the context of the Iban community's *Gawai* festival, adoption of this 'spectral' view presents an opportunity to reevaluate its significance. The *Gawai* festival, closely linked to rice planting and marking the culmination of harvest season, occupies a central place in Iban culture.

Excerpt 6.9

Radin's narrative emphasises the generational practices of the Iban community, particularly during the *Gawai* festival. He recalls participating in every *miring* opportunity in the longhouse, highlighting how these practices are deeply embedded in Iban social life. Radin's experiences demonstrate that the *miring* ritual is not only a tradition but also a way to maintain social bonds and community cohesion. This aligns with Deumert's assertion that sociolinguistics should account for the sensuous and affective nature of social life, acknowledging the role of spectral entities in shaping human behaviour.

Excerpt 6.10

Chendan's account further underscores the indispensability of the *miring* ritual during *Gawai* celebrations. He describes the *miring* as a prelude to *Gawai*, tracing its continuity since 1965. Chendan highlights the invocation of gods and ancestors during *miring* as a vital element, serving both as a formal announcement of the *Gawai* celebrations and as an earnest appeal for divine assistance. This practice reflects the significance of *miring* in preserving Iban social

values and fostering community cohesion. As Chendan explains, “The *miring* is a necessary platform for offerings and invitations to the ancestors and gods, likening the gesture to inviting guests to one’s home and offering them food.” This demonstrates how the *miring* ritual reinforces the interconnectedness between the living and the spiritual realm, echoing Deumert’s idea of listening to and making spectral entities visible.

The *Gawai* celebration follows a general pattern of rites. This multifaceted celebration is deeply rooted in Iban culture and plays a pivotal role in preserving their social values and community cohesion (Kedit 1993, p. 180). Chendan describes the *miring* as imperative to celebrating *Gawai,* and the invocation as a very important element of the *miring*. The rationale behind this invocation is twofold: first, it served as a formal announcement of engagement with the *Gawai* celebrations, and secondly, it signified an earnest appeal for divine assistance to improve quality of life. The invocation begins with calling for Iban ancestors and gods to grace the *Gawai* events. The spiritual entities are called to help with requests for better health and wealth, among others, from the worldly relatives. Chendan reiterates that the *miring* is a necessary platform for offerings and invitations to the ancestors and gods, likening the gesture to inviting guests to one’s home and offering them food.

Official recognition of *Gawai* from the Malaysian federal government in 1965 contributed to shaping its annual celebrations in Iban longhouses. The sociolinguistic implications of the *Gawai*, explored through the ‘spectral’ view, extend beyond cultural celebration. They involve invoking gods, preserving traditions, and strengthening community bonds. This spectral perspective challenges traditional sociolinguistic boundaries and reveals how rituals like the *Gawai* contribute to the organisation and reorganisation of the Iban community and their social values.

Excerpt 6.11

Daud’s narrative highlights the cultural significance of *miring* within the Iban community, particularly in the context of *Gawai* celebrations. He emphasises that *miring* is foundational to everything the Ibans do, reflecting its enduring importance in shaping Iban identity and values. Daud’s mention of the Malaysian government declaring a public holiday for *Gawai Dayak* illustrates official recognition and support for cultural traditions, promoting a shared sense of national identity. He notes that *Gawai* celebrations offer an opportunity for the Dayak community to showcase their culture, emphasising that the objective is not solely to display

Iban culture but to underscore the significance of *miring*. Daud's clarification that *Gawai* is not primarily about alcohol consumption, but rather about *miring*, reinforces the central role of this ritual in the festival. This supports Deumert's (2022) exploration of the persistence of cultural elements in post-colonial contexts, highlighting how *miring* continues to be integral to Iban social and cultural life.

Conclusion

From the narratives of Radin, Chendan, and Daud, I can confidently assert that the practice of *miring* during the *Gawai* festival is a vital medium for spectral communication and social cohesion within the Iban community. These narratives support the claim that *miring* rituals are essential for interacting with the spiritual realm, guiding individual and communal actions, and reinforcing cultural continuity. This analysis underscores the significance of spectral thinking in understanding Iban beliefs, highlighting the intricate interplay between human and non-human agency in shaping their social reality.

6.4 The Iban longhouse

All participants linked *miring* with the Iban longhouse. They affirmed this in their individual narratives.

Excerpt 6.12: Cherang – narration of how to build a longhouse

> C: You listen carefully. When the world comes to existence, humankind lives scattered in simple dwellings,
> L: Humankind are the Ibans, Elder father?
> C: Yes, the Ibans were living in individual simple dwellings. Then the Ibans who intend to have proper dwelling, send a *taba* to the ground where they have intentions to build proper dwelling- a longhouse.
> L: What is a *taba* elder father?
> C: The *taba* contains offerings to the gods, and it is sent to the origins of the soil. Listen carefully, the offerings are made to ask the spirits of the soil for permission to build a longhouse.
> L: Ask the soil?
> C: Yes, the offerings were given to ask the soil, after three days have passed, only if the offerings do not fall to the ground, it means the offerings have been accepted and the ground can be a place to set up a proper dwelling, the longhouse. If the ground has accepted the offerings as a place to set up a longhouse, then we have a meeting. How many would want to set up a longhouse together.

Excerpt 6.13: Gundi – associates *miring* with the longhouse

> That's an interesting point there, because since childhood, because we, you know, we know from the longhouse background, anything, any activity being farming or whatever, must start with *miring*. Because of *miring*, as I now recall, in our society, *miring* at that time is equivalent to our prayer now. We cannot go out before you do your responsibility, I mean, I mean not a small adventure but in anything you want to do, you have to have a *miring*. So, in actual fact, I saw a lot of these offerings. Shall we use the word offering? After this?

6.4.1 Analysis and discussion

Deumert (2022) posits that the sociolinguistics of spectres involves acknowledging and listening to ghosts, as they play a crucial role in shaping social realities. Deumert (2022, pp.11-12) emphasises on listening to ghosts by acknowledging the importance of seeking out these spectral entities and making them visible in our research designs, aligning with Derrida's (1993) call to engage with the spectral rather than exclude it.

Hollan (2020) underscores that ghosts and spirits, considered ontologically "real" by the people studied, are highly social and knowable. Although typically invisible, they manifest in practices and rituals where they can be interacted with directly.

Excerpt 6.12

Cherang's account provides concrete evidence supporting the theoretical claims about the sociolinguistics of spectres. He describes the meticulous process of seeking approval from the spirits before constructing a longhouse. He explains, "The offerings are made to ask the spirits of the soil for permission to build a longhouse. If the offerings do not fall to the ground after three days, it means the offerings have been accepted and the ground can be a place to set up a proper dwelling."

The *miring* underscores the significance of spectral communication in Iban culture. By performing these offerings, the Ibans acknowledge the agency of the spirits and their role in determining the suitability of the land for habitation. This aligns with Deumert's (2018, 2022) assertion that listening to ghosts and integrating their presence into social practices is essential for understanding the dynamics of social life.

The concept of spectral thinking challenges traditional notions of sovereign agency by highlighting how non-human voices and actions, such as those of spirits and ancestors, influence human behaviour. Cherang's experience exemplifies this, as the decision to build a longhouse is contingent upon the approval of the spirits. His narrative demonstrates that human agency is intertwined with spectral forces, reflecting Deumert's (2022) emphasis on the interconnectedness of social and spiritual realms.

Cherang's narrative also illustrates how the Ibans draw on rituals and offerings, to engage with spectral entities. By incorporating these practices into their social lives, the Ibans maintain a dynamic understanding of agency that transcends human-centric perspectives. This is evident when Cherang describes the process of consulting the spirits and holding meetings to decide on building the longhouse, emphasising the communal and spectral dimensions of this decision-making process.

Cherang's narrative supports the claim that these rituals are essential for interacting with the spiritual realm, guiding individual and communal actions, and reinforcing cultural continuity. This analysis underscores the significance of spectral thinking in understanding Iban beliefs, highlighting the intricate interplay between human and non-human agency in shaping their social reality.

Excerpt 6.13

Gundi's narrative provides sound evidence supporting Deumert's (2022) theoretical claims about the sociolinguistics of spectres. He describes the significance of *miring* in Iban society, emphasising that it is a foundational practice for any activity, akin to prayer in contemporary contexts. Gundi states, "since childhood, because we, you know, we know from the longhouse background, anything, any activity being farming or whatever, must start with *miring*. Because of *miring*, as I now recall, in our society, *miring* at that time is equivalent to our prayer now."

This practice of *miring* illustrates how the Ibans engage with spectral communication to ensure success and harmony in their endeavours. It underscores the role of spectral entities in guiding and influencing daily activities, aligning with Deumert's assertion that listening to ghosts and integrating their presence into social practices is essential for understanding the dynamics of social life. By performing *miring*, the Ibans seek the blessings and approval of spirits, highlighting the interconnectedness of the spiritual and material worlds.

Hollan (2020) underscores that ghosts and spirits often manifest in rituals where they can be interacted with directly. Gundi's account aligns with this perspective, as he explains that *miring* is an essential practice to ensure the favour and presence of spirits in their activities. He notes, "you have to have a *miring*. So, in actual fact, I saw a lot of these offerings."

The concept of spectral thinking challenges traditional notions of sovereign agency by highlighting how non-human voices and actions, such as those of spirits and ancestors, influence human behaviour. Gundi's experience exemplifies this, as the necessity of performing *miring* before any significant activity indicates that individual and communal actions are guided by spectral forces. This shows that human agency is intertwined with spectral entities, reflecting Deumert's emphasis on the interconnectedness of social and spiritual realms.

Gundi's narrative shows that the Ibans maintain a dynamic understanding of agency that transcends human-centric perspectives. This is evident when Gundi describes the process of performing *miring* before any activity, emphasising the importance of seeking the spirits' approval and blessings.

Conclusion

Deumert (2022) emphasises the importance of acknowledging and listening to ghosts in understanding social realities. This approach aligns with Derrida's (1993) idea of making spectral entities visible in research rather than excluding them. Both Cherang's and Gundi's narratives provide concrete evidence supporting these theoretical claims by illustrating how spectral communication through rituals like *miring* influences Iban cultural practices and social structures.

Cherang's narrative about the rituals performed to establish a longhouse underscores the practical and spiritual dimensions of spectral communication. He explains that offerings are made to the spirits of the soil to seek their permission to build a longhouse. This ritual, which involves observing whether the offerings are accepted, highlights the direct interaction with spectral entities. Cherang states, "The offerings are made to ask the spirits of the soil for permission to build a longhouse." This practice reflects Deumert's idea of integrating spectral entities into everyday life and social practices.

Similarly, Gundi's account emphasises the essential role of *miring* in various aspects of Iban life, from farming to welcoming guests. He likens *miring* to prayer, illustrating its fundamental importance in ensuring the favour and presence of spirits in their activities. Gundi notes, "In our society, *miring* at that time is equivalent to our prayer now. You have to have a *miring*. So, in actual fact, I saw a lot of these offerings." This narrative demonstrates how spectral communication through *miring* is deeply embedded in the Iban's daily practices and social interactions.

6.5 Offering food to the gods: *piring*

Photographs 6.6: Preparing offerings for the *miring* ritual

In the photograph 6.6 above, a longhouse committee selects a few members to prepare the food for the invoked deities.

Piring is an integral component of every ritual performed by the Ibans as they seek success or assistance in their endeavours. Sutlive and Sutlive (2001) assert the significance of this practice is underscored by the saying, "There is no ritual activity that is not observed with offerings". Offerings are presented to deities, spirits, and ancestors either as a mark of respect or to seek forgiveness for transgressions, such as violating taboos or failing to fulfil obligations. There is

an underlying rationale behind the act of offering: a typical Iban offering to a spirit reflects the hospitality extended to a guest and follows a specific sequence. It commences with items for chewing and smoking, followed by what the Ibans consider 'real food' – primarily rice – and concludes with optional extras (Jensen 1974, p. 79 in Sutlive and Sutlive 2001, p. 1305). Sutlive and Sutlive (2001) also mention that offerings may consist of one or more portions, with each simple offering containing all items except occasionally the egg. Typically, offerings come in multiples of three, five, seven, or nine, with each ingredient aside from the egg divided into corresponding portions. In this section, my participants opine on the types of food offerings and their experiences preparing *piring* as part of the *miring* rituals.

Excerpt 6.14: Chendan – explanation of the importance of *piring*

> Therefore, since you are recording this, I would like to tell you that from the Saribas riverine, we have 21 different types of offerings.
> Number 1: Betel nut and it must be a green betel nut. *Only if you really can't find a green betel nut, then you settle for a seasoned one*. Number 2: betel leaf. Number 3: lime.Number 4: tobacco roll. Number 5: tobacco. Number 6: yellow glutinous rice. Number 7: white glutinous rice. Number 8: red glutinous rice. Number 9: black glutinous rice. Number 10: plain rice, plain rice that we eat every day
> Number 11: salt. Number 12: egg. 13: banana. 14: sago, eh no, dumpling rice woven in palm leaves. 15: *sungkui*, or tapioca. 16: sago. 17; yellow rice. 18: *penganan* (traditional cake). 19: rice pops. 20: oil. 21: rice wine. If the 21 *ingredients are not met, the piring or offering will be incomplete.* That is why us Ibans from Betong, Saribas and Saratok must have all the 21 ingredients. We would divide each ingredient into smaller portions and would not offer the entire portion of each. All the 21 ingredients make up the *miring* offerings.You get that first, that one later. This is the amount of offerings, how many offerings, portion of the betel nut," the elders would say that, I recalled. And the preparations are different in accordance with the purpose of *miring*. If we are preparing for a small ritual, the amount of offerings would be lesser and vice versa. The amount of offerings in the individual abode is different from the offerings in the common gallery. The amount of offerings in the common gallery is different from the amount of offerings in the open veranda of the longhouse. These are the several levels of the *miring*.

Excerpt 6.15: Daud – discussion of the importance of *piring*

> Everything was set with the *miring*. And the *miring* offerings must be complete. If the offering plate is not complete, and at the same time, the gods and ancestors were invoked to grace the events, they would be angered if insufficient foods were offered. And you don't want that to happen because bad things will happen to instead. The offering preparation is a serious matter. I have seen bards fainted because of insufficient offering foods,

Excerpt 6.16: Chendan – relates the *piring* to the longhouse

It is not offered a whole, but each food offering should be divided and that is what we call the *piring*. And that is why we call it *miring*. You asked me about *miring* in the individual family abode and so on. Well, in the individual family abode, it has 3 food offerings, 3 betel leaves. When you move to the common gallery, you would need to have 5 betel leaves. These betel leaves carry big meanings. Then, you should also prepare 5 tobacco leaves, 5 slices of a boiled egg, 5 portions of glutinous rice. And if any need arises to perform the *miring* at the *pantar* (the main pillar of the longhouse), then we should prepare 7 betel leaves and so on. If you move to the verandah of the longhouse, this indicates a significant ritual. Significant rituals such as *Gawai Sandau Ari* and *Gawai Burung* or a feast for an omen, we prepare 9 types of food offerings.

Excerpt 6.17: Lambat – description of the *piring*

Next, the Iban will start to prepare for a few sets of food trays for the gods. The first set is prepared especially for Semerugah the King of the soil. Ibans believes that he is the god of the earth, especially in terms of farming. The first ingredient for each tray is the betel nut. Semerugah's food tray should consist of 9 slices of betel nuts, followed by tobacco, dried *nipah* leaves, and a host of other ingredients. Then the preparation for the other trays follow in the sets of 7 and 5. Then we recited our chant.

Excerpt 6.18: Belayong – description of the *piring*

B: Which is first, second and third,
L: The food offerings?
B: Yes. The food offerings.Well, it also depends on the types of rituals. If it is *Gawai Sakit*, or a healing ritual, it is necessary to have black rice, yellow rice and white rice. And, if it is a healing ritual, the right order is, black rice, yellow rice and white rice.
L: Okay
B: The last food order is the rice wine. Serve the rice wine after all the other food offerings. The second last should be the rice pops. *Letup*, or popcorn (it is commonly known as popcorns eventhough they are actually rice pops)The popcorn has to be scattered first before the *miring* session. I forgot to mention that part. The popcorn has to be scattered first to invoke the gods. The popcorn acts as a 'bridge' for the gods to come over. While scattering them, we recite appropriate chants. For example, "We have a *miring* this evening, we invite the gods to come, and you have heard us calling for you," that is one of the basic introductions of a chant.
L: All right.
L: Jang, do you see any differences between the present *miring* practices and the ones you have seen when you were younger?
B: One of the difference is the types of food offerings. From my personal observation, the most obvious difference is in the food offerings. I think it is because now people have money. I remember we used to prepare rice in bamboo, now we can just buy wrapped rice from the market. People just don't cook bamboo rice anymore.
L: Yes
B: That is one of the differences. Next is the chicken. People are reluctant to use the Iban chicken anymore, and they prefer the Chinese chicken. If we observe the *miring*, we must use an Iban chicken and it has to be a cockerel. That is the difference. We usually use the rice wine, and it is rightly so, but the ones with money prefer to offer liquors to the gods, sometimes Chivas.

L: Okay
B: If you are offering food to the gods, it is only right to offer them rice wine.
L: So, are saying liquors are not appropriate?
B: In this case, it is still acceptable. That is also one of the difference between now and the past. For example, popcorns, previously it was prepared from rice we harvested from our own rice field. Now, we just buy ready-made popcorns from the market. The thing is, the ones sold in the market are from corn, not rice.
L; Yes
B: If they observed proper *miring*, that is not right.
L: okay
B: But, what can we do?
L: Yes
B: People are not willing to prepare it themselves. It is widely sold in Miri. At the Miri and Bintulu markets. I know because I was always invited to perform the *miring* in these areas.
L: So you perform the *miring* there, and, so these are the changes and differences that you have observed about the *miring* practice. Some of the differences are acceptable and some are not,
M: Yes.For me, if I am asked to perform the *miring*, I will request for an Iban cockerel.
L: Okay. Why it has to be a cockerel?
B: If you really want to do the *miring* properly, you have to have the right offerings. If it is done properly and correctly, then your prayers will be answered. I have always let them know my terms before agreeing to perform the *miring* for them. I will inform them, if they are still insisting on a Chinese chicken and not an Iban chicken, what you seek for will not be found. The gods will refuse you.
L: Okay, that is how you feel about it?
B: Yes, that is what I think about it.
L: Do you think other bards use Chinese chicken?
B: Very rarely. Especially for significant rituals. They would rather not. But, if it is a small ritual, and it is very difficult to acquire an Iban cockerel, we can use the Chinese chicken. There are bards who are willing to do that. But I would still advise to use the Iban cockerel.
Even an Iban hen is not appropriate. It has to be an Iban cockerel.
L: That is definitely a *miring* requirement for you.
B: Yes. However, there are some people who take things (*miring* requirements) lightly. They just use an egg. When we talk about offering food to our dead ancestors, it does not mean we prepare a feast of cooked chicken and noodles. It does not mean that. The dead ancestors only partake in food offerings during a *miring*. After the *miring*, then we invite our cousins, our family members and we will eat together.Only after the *miring*. For example, if my (dead) grandfather asks for food, and I did not prepare the *miring*. Instead I just offer noodles, rice and other food to the other members of the longhouse. It does not work that way. *Miring* is the number one priority.

Excerpt 6.19: Cherang – description of the *piring* for *kelam ai*

Back to the trial by water, so, the *miring* ceremony started in the evening.
Yes, *miring*. Before the diving started, there was already a crowd. For a trial by water, the highest attributes of *piring*, of food offerings were prepared. Therefore, for a trial

by water, 9 types of food offerings were prepared. Therefore, it has to be 9 *pirings* for a trial by water.
9 *pirings*. 9 types of food offerings because this is a trial by water. 9 types, (showing his fingers, counting), one two three nine, types of food. Each food is divided into 9 portions, for example, the betel nut leaf is sliced into 9. The divers (or champions for the both parties undergoing the trial) were asked to sleep in a prepared squared area. The area was gated with traditional woven clothes.

Excerpt 6.20: Cherang – description of the *piring* for *nampok*

C: Therefore we would prepare 5 types of food offerings. 5 slices. 5 to 9. And a pig (sacrifice). The pig's liver will be read, for the pig sacrifice. We would need 3 types of food offerings for a female pig,
L: And , and 7 types of food offerings for a male pig?
C: No, we would accept a male or female pig for sacrifice.

6.5.1 Analysis and discussion

Deumert (2022) explores the sociolinguistics of spectres by advocating for the inclusion of spectral entities in research, challenging the traditional exclusion of these elements. This perspective aligns with Derrida's (1993) idea of actively seeking out and making spectral entities visible rather than ghosting them. Sutlive and Sutlive (2001) emphasise the cultural significance of *piring* in Iban rituals, highlighting that there is no ritual without offerings. These offerings, presented to deities, spirits, and ancestors, follow a specific sequence and reflect the hospitality extended to their spectral guests.

Excerpt 6.14

Chendan's explanation of piring underscores its importance in Iban culture. He describes the detailed preparation and significance of offerings, noting that, "from the Saribas riverine, we have 21 different types of offerings." He lists each ingredient meticulously, explaining that if all 21 ingredients are not present, the piring is considered incomplete. This aligns with Sutlive and Sutlive's (2001) assertion that offerings are integral to Iban ritual activities and must adhere to specific cultural protocols.

Chendan elaborates, "the amount of offerings in the individual abode is different from the offerings in the common gallery... These are the several levels of the *miring*." This differentiation in the levels and settings of *miring* offerings illustrates how spectral communication is embedded in various social contexts within Iban culture. The detailed

preparation and specific ingredients required for piring reflect the Iban's deep respect for their spiritual traditions and the importance of maintaining proper rituals to honour the spirits and ancestors.

The practice of *piring*, as described by Chendan, justifies the claim that spectral communication and hospitality are intertwined in Iban culture. By performing *miring* with precise offerings, the Ibans ensure they show respect and seek favour from the spiritual entities. This practice embodies Deumert's (2022) idea of listening to ghosts and making them visible within social research, as it demonstrates how the Ibans actively engage with spectral entities through their rituals.

Spectral communication is evident in Chendan's narrative, which highlights the role of rituals in mediating between the living and the spiritual realm. He notes, "The amount of offerings in the *ruai* or common gallery is different from the amount of offerings in the *tanju* or open veranda of the longhouse." This variation in ritual practice according to space and occasion underscores the intricate interplay between the living and the spiritual realm, reinforcing the interconnectedness of Iban social and spiritual life.

From Chendan's detailed account, I can assert that the sociolinguistics of spectres, as proposed by Deumert (2022), is deeply reflected in Iban practices. The *piring* offerings during *miring* rituals exemplify the active engagement with spectral entities, highlighting how these practices are crucial for maintaining cultural traditions and social bonds. This analysis underscores the importance of acknowledging and incorporating spectral elements in sociolinguistic research to fully understand the complexities of Iban cultural practices and the essential role of spectral communication in their social and spiritual interactions.

Excerpt 6.15

Daud's discussion on the importance of *piring* underscores its significance within Iban culture. He highlights the necessity of complete *miring* offerings to appease the gods and ancestors. Daud states, "Everything was set with the *miring*. And the *miring* offerings must be complete. If the offering plate is not complete, and at the same time, the gods and ancestors were invoked to grace the events, they would be angered if insufficient foods were offered. And you don't want that to happen because bad things will happen to you instead. The offering preparation is a serious matter. I have seen *lemambang* faint because of insufficient offering foods."

This narrative supports Deumert's (2022) theoretical claim by illustrating how the Iban people engage with spectral entities through ritual offerings. Daud's account demonstrates the importance of piring in maintaining harmony between the living and the spiritual realms, thus making the spectral entities visible and acknowledging their influence on social practices.

Sutlive and Sutlive (2001) describe the detailed process of preparing offerings, which involves multiple portions and specific ingredients. This ritualistic preparation reflects the deep respect the Iban people have for their spiritual traditions and the importance of adhering to cultural protocols. Daud's emphasis on the completeness of offerings aligns with this, highlighting how each element of the piring holds significance in appeasing the spirits and ensuring their favour.

Daud's experience illustrates the intricate interplay between human and non-human agency in shaping social reality. The preparation and presentation of offerings are seen as essential acts of communication with the spiritual realm, reinforcing the interconnectedness between the Iban people and their spectral entities. This supports the idea that spectral communication is integral to Iban social and cultural life, guiding individual roles and reinforcing cultural continuity.

Spectral communication, as demonstrated by Daud's narrative, is an essential aspect of Iban rituals. The act of making offerings and performing *miring* rituals is a form of dialogue with the spirits. This communication ensures that the spirits are acknowledged and respected, thereby maintaining a balance between the physical and spiritual worlds. Daud's account highlights how the spirits are not just passive recipients but active participants in the community's life. The spirits' reactions to the offerings—whether they are appeased or angered—directly affect the community's well-being.

Excerpt 6.16

Chendan's narrative provides a detailed account of how *piring* is integral to the *miring* rituals, particularly within the context of the longhouse. He explains, "It is not offered a whole, but each food offering should be divided and that is what we call the *piring*. And that is why we call it *miring*." This highlights the careful and deliberate preparation of offerings, reflecting the cultural and spiritual significance of these practices.

Chendan further elaborates on the different levels of *miring* based on the setting within the longhouse: "In the individual family abode, it has 3 food offerings, 3 betel leaves. When you move to the common gallery, you would need to have 5 betel leaves. These betel leaves carry

big meanings." This demonstrates the gradation in ritual offerings, symbolising the varying degrees of significance attached to different spaces within the longhouse.

The preparation and presentation of offerings are meticulously detailed, as Chendan notes: "Then, you should also prepare 5 tobacco leaves, 5 slices of a boiled egg, 5 portions of glutinous rice. And if any need arises to perform the *miring* at the *pantar* (the main pillar of the longhouse), then we should prepare 7 betel leaves and so on." This reflects the deep respect and adherence to cultural protocols that are integral to Iban spiritual practices.

Chendan's description aligns with Sutlive and Sutlive's (2001) assertion that offerings follow a specific sequence, commencing with items for chewing and smoking, followed by 'real food' – primarily rice – and concluding with optional extras. This process underscores the ritualistic nature of *miring*, where offerings are seen as a form of hospitality extended to spiritual entities, akin to how guests are treated in the physical world.

Chendan's narrative exemplifies the concept of spectral communication, where offerings serve as a medium for interaction with spiritual entities. By carefully preparing and presenting the *piring*, the Iban people engage in a dialogue with the spirits, seeking their favour and ensuring harmony. This ritual acts as a bridge between the human and spiritual realms, reinforcing the interconnectedness highlighted by Deumert (2022).

The significance of spectral communication is evident in Chendan's account: "If you move to the verandah of the longhouse, this indicates a significant ritual. Significant rituals such as *Gawai Sandau Ari* and *Gawai Burung* or a feast for an omen, we prepare 9 types of food offerings." These offerings are not merely symbolic but are seen as essential for maintaining balance and addressing any potential disturbances from the spectral world.

Excerpt 6.17

Lambat's description of the *piring* exemplifies the practical application of these theoretical claims within the Iban community. He explains, "Next, the Iban will start to prepare for a few sets of food trays for the gods. The first set is prepared especially for Semerugah the King of the soil. Ibans believes that he is the god of the earth, especially in terms of farming. The first ingredient for each tray is the betel nut. Semerugah's food tray should consist of 9 slices of betel nuts, followed by tobacco, dried *nipah* leaves, and a host of other ingredients. Then the preparation for the other trays follow in the sets of 7 and 5. Then we recited our chant." This

detailed account of the preparation and offering process underscores the significance of piring in Iban rituals.

The preparation and offering of *piring*, as described by Lambat, align closely with the theoretical claims put forth by Deumert (2022) and Sutlive and Sutlive (2001). The careful and deliberate preparation of food trays for the gods, with specific ingredients and quantities, illustrates how these offerings are not only acts of hospitality but also crucial mediums for spectral communication. By preparing and offering *piring*, the Ibans engage in a dialogue with the spirits, seeking their favour and ensuring harmony.

Deumert's (2022, p.6) notion of listening to ghosts is reflected in the meticulous rituals described by Lambat. The act of preparing offerings for Semerugah, the god of the earth, and other deities signifies an active engagement with spectral entities, seeking their blessings and approval for agricultural and other activities. This practice highlights the interconnectedness between the spiritual and material worlds, reinforcing Deumert's (2022) assertion that spectral thinking involves acknowledging the influence of non-human voices and actions on human behaviour.

Sutlive and Sutlive's (2001) emphasis on the significance of offerings is evident in Lambat's narrative. The specific sequence and composition of the *piring*, from the betel nut to the various other ingredients, demonstrate a deep respect for tradition and the belief in the efficacy of these rituals. Lambat's account confirms the scholarly assertion that offerings are essential for appeasing spirits and maintaining a harmonious relationship with the spectral realm.

Lambat's description of the preparation and offering of *piring* provides a clear example of spectral communication. The detailed process of preparing food trays for the gods and the recitation of chants are not just ritualistic actions but are seen as a means of communicating with the spirits. This form of communication is integral to Iban social and cultural life, as it ensures the favour and protection of the gods and ancestors. By engaging in these rituals, the Ibans maintain a connection with the spiritual realm, which guides and influences their everyday actions.

Excerpt 6.18

Belayong's detailed description of *piring* provides concrete evidence supporting these theoretical claims. He explains the specific requirements and variations of the offerings based

on the type of ritual, such as *Gawai Sakit* (healing ritual), and emphasises the importance of preparing these offerings correctly to appease the gods and ensure successful outcomes.

The preparation and offering of *piring*, as described by Belayong, align closely with Deumert's (2022) and Sutlive and Sutlive's (2001) assertions about the significance of ritual offerings and spectral communication. Belayong explains, "The food offerings. Well, it also depends on the types of rituals. If it is *Gawai Sakit*, or a healing ritual, it is necessary to have black rice, yellow rice, and white rice. And, if it is a healing ritual, the right order is, black rice, yellow rice, and white rice." This illustrates the meticulous process and the cultural importance of *piring* in maintaining relationships with the spiritual realm.

Deumert's (2022) notion of listening to ghosts is reflected in the meticulous rituals described by Belayong. The act of preparing offerings for the gods signifies an active engagement with spectral entities, seeking their blessings and approval. This practice highlights the interconnectedness between the spiritual and material worlds, reinforcing Deumert's assertion that spectral thinking involves acknowledging the influence of non-human voices and actions on human behaviour.

Sutlive and Sutlive's (2001) emphasis on the significance of offerings is evident in Belayong's narrative. The specific sequence and composition of the *piring*, from the betel nut to various other ingredients, demonstrate a deep respect for tradition and the belief in the efficacy of these rituals. Belayong notes, "The popcorn must be scattered first to invoke the gods. The popcorn acts as a 'bridge' for the gods to come over. While scattering them, we recite appropriate chants." This confirms the scholarly assertion that offerings are essential for appeasing spirits and maintaining a harmonious relationship with the spectral realm.

Belayong's detailed account of preparing and offering *piring* provides a clear example of spectral communication. The ritual of scattering popcorn and reciting chants to invite the gods demonstrates how the Ibans engage in a dialogue with the spirits. This form of communication is integral to Iban social and cultural life, ensuring the favour and protection of the gods and ancestors.

Belayong's narrative underscores the importance of specific offerings, such as using an Iban cockerel instead of a Chinese chicken, to properly communicate with the gods and ensure the effectiveness of the *miring*. He asserts, "If they are still insisting on a Chinese chicken and not an Iban chicken, what you seek for will not be found. The gods will refuse you." This highlights

how adherence to traditional practices and proper offerings are crucial for successful spectral communication.

Excerpts 6.19 and 6.20

Cherang's detailed descriptions of the *piring* for *kelam ai* and *nampok* provide concrete evidence supporting the theoretical claims about spectral communication and the importance of offerings.

Cherang's narrative aligns closely with Deumert's and Sutlive and Sutlive's assertions. In describing the *piring* for *kelam ai*, Cherang explains, "For a trial by water, the highest attributes of *piring*, of food offerings were prepared. Therefore, for a trial by water, 9 types of food offerings were prepared. Each food is divided into 9 portions." This meticulous preparation underscores the ritual's significance and the belief in the efficacy of offerings to engage with the spectral realm.

Similarly, Cherang's account of the *piring* for *nampok* highlights the ritual's complexity and the specific offerings required: "We would prepare 5 types of food offerings. 5 slices. 5 to 9. And a pig (sacrifice)." This illustrates how offerings are tailored to different rituals, reflecting the nuanced understanding of spectral needs and the importance of precise ritual practice.

The concept of spectral communication is evident in these practices. By preparing and offering *piring*, the Ibans engage in a dialogue with the spirits, seeking their favour or appeasement. This aligns with Deumert's idea of learning to listen to ghosts, as the offerings serve as a medium for this communication. The detailed preparation and the specific sequence of offerings reflect a deep respect for tradition and the belief in the power of these rituals to maintain harmony with the spiritual realm.

Cherang's narratives also support Sutlive and Sutlive's (2001) observation that offerings are an essential part of Iban rituals. The variety and specificity of the offerings, from the betel nut to the sacrificial pig, highlight the meticulous nature of these practices and their role in spectral communication. Cherang's recounting of how "the betel nut leaf is sliced into 9" and how different types of food offerings are prepared based on the ritual underscores the importance of these details in the success of the ritual.

Conclusion

The analysis of Daud's, Chendan's, Lambat's, Belayong's, and Cherang's narratives demonstrates that *piring* is a crucial practice in Iban culture, deeply intertwined with their beliefs and traditions. The theoretical claims by Deumert (2022) and Sutlive and Sutlive (2001) provide a robust framework for understanding the significance of these offerings. *Piring* serves as a medium for spectral communication, respecting and appeasing the spirits, and ensuring the community's harmony and well-being. This practice exemplifies how the Ibans maintain their cultural continuity and navigate the complexities of their spiritual landscape, reinforcing the intricate interplay between human and non-human agency in shaping their social reality.

6.6 Conflict resolution: *kelam ai*

Cherang insisted on narrating his experience as a young man witnessing a *kelam ai* in Kedoh, Roban. He is a retired Iban *Penghulu* and holds the esteemed position of community leader within the Iban community. During our interview, he was determined to impart his recollections of the *kelam ai*; his motivation for sharing this narrative was rooted in a profound desire to ensure the preservation and transmission of this cultural knowledge to future generations. He emphasised that knowledge of *kelam ai* is not widely known among Ibans of subsequent generations, thereby revealing the importance of recording his account in its entirety. Cherang explicitly requested that I meticulously transcribe every word he uttered, thus demonstrating his commitment to preserving the historical significance of the event**.**

Initially, I held reservations about the focus of our discussion as I had anticipated a more comprehensive exploration of the technical aspects of *miring*, a customary ritual of which I became familiar by observing my grandfather and his sons, including Cherang, who conducted *miring* ceremonies on numerous occasions within our longhouse. Nevertheless, I acquiesced to his wishes and proceeded with the interview – albeit with some uncertainty regarding the fate of my original interview guide.

Excerpt 6.21: Cherang – narration of the *kelam ai*

L: What is it about the *kelam ai*, and how old were you at that time?
C: I think I was around 20 years old; I was already a man.
L: Okay.

C: I was in Kedoh when I witnessed this.
L: So, what is this *kelam ai*, elder father, can you describe what you saw?
C: Yes, for this particular *kelam ai*. It involved Talak, a man from Brayang. And Talak had a land dispute with Mujah, also from Brayang. They were both from Brayang. They fought for a piece of land.
L: Okay
C: The dispute was not settled by the longhouse. They also found the dispute very difficult to resolve, so both parties agree for a *kelam ai*,
L: Who fought with Talak, again?
C: Fighting over a piece of land,
L: Who was fighting over a piece of land with Talak?
C: Mujah
L: then what happened, elder father?
C: This happened way before I became a *penghulu*, probably more than 40 years ago.
L: Okay. Therefore, against Mujah's claims, it was to be resolved with the *kelam ai?*
C: Both sides wanted the dispute to be resolved by the *kelam ai*. So, both sides got ready.
L: Okay
C: There was no involvement of the *tuai rumah*, or the head of the longhouse, and they refused any interference from the *tuai rumah* when it came to this matter.
L: Okay
C: If the *tuai rumah* is found out allowing *kelam ai* by the authorities, he can be arrested.
L: Okay
C: The losing side will have to deal with the authorities, back to the *kelam ai*, so the *miring* ceremony started in the evening.
L: *Miring*?
C: Yes, *miring*. Before the diving started, there was already a crowd. For a *kelam ai*, the highest attributes of *piring*, of food offerings were prepared. Therefore, for a *kelam ai*, 9 types of food offerings were prepared. Therefore, it has to be 9 *piring* for a *kelam ai*.
L:*9 piring*.
C: 9 types of food offerings because this is a *kelam ai*. 9 types, (showing his fingers, counting), one two three nine, types of food.
L: Okay,
C: Each food is divided into 9 portions, for example the betel nut leaf is sliced into 9 portions. The divers (or champions for the both parties undergoing the trial) were asked to sleep in a prepared squared area. The area was gated with traditional woven clothes. There were other people who slept outside the prepared square. The situation looked like keeping the dead, except for the ones in the square were only sleeping.
L: Okay.
C: When the sun rose, all the chants were already completed.
L: Okay.
C: Anyway, only a few managed to sleep outside the square and the two inside the square were sleeping. The two persons sleeping in the square,
L: In the square that was similar for the one prepared for the dead.
C: Yes, like the one prepared for the dead.
L: Okay.
C: The square was gated with woven clothes,
L: Okay

C: When it is dawn, there were sounding drums and gongs, all the *piring* or food offerings were brought forward, some people were sounding drums and gongs, and *miring* was performed for 5 times,
L: Okay.
C: All the *piring* were spread on a wide plate and placed in between the two champions sleeping. One slept on the left and another on the right of the plate. The others do not really sleep. They were occupied with several entertainments and games. Living in the longhouse, we went here and there, watching people playing cards, those days, watching people gamble.
L: Okay.
C: The gambling was popular. When dawn arrived, before the rooster crows, before 3 am, everyone was awake, especially the ones involved in the trial. Then, the elders started the day by asking the two champions on whether they had received any dreams,
L: Okay.
C: "So, did any of you receive any dreams?"
L: okay.
C: "Which of you receive any dreams?" Then the two explain about their experiences through the night. Only a few can know of their stories.
L: Okay.
C: Only Mujah will know who his champion would be,
L: Okay.
C: The rest were not able to know which of the two.
L: Okay.
C: Which champion would (represent Mujah), we will not know until the trial. So, when dawn comes,
L: Elder father, where was the *kelam ai* held, again?
C: Ah?
L: Which river?
C: A river in Brayang, a tributary of the Seblak river.
L: Okay.
C: I was in Kedoh at the time, that is why I knew what was going on there. I was not here, Bratong. That is why I was with them during the trial.
C: To continue, the drums were sounded and the crowds gathered. A temporary shelter was built,
L: Okay.
C: a temporary shelter was built near the riverside where the trial was to be held, the shelter was covered with traditional woven clothes,
L: Okay.
C: And the *piring*, the *piring* that were prepared earlier were carried to the trial site,
L: The *piring* with the 9 types of food offerings?
C: Ah?
L: The same *piring* that the two champions had slept with earlier on?
S: Yes, it was brought to the trial site, and there was no more *miring* on the site.
L: Yes
C: So, these two champions were escorted to the trial site with the sounding of drums and gongs along its route. And when they arrived at the site, the two champions were asked again, "Who will be representing Mujah in the trial?". And of course, both did not say a word. Then, the *enselua*, or a cooking fire was lit,
L: Okay.

C: At the river side, woods were piled, and a fire was lit. The fire is called *enselua*.
L: Okay.
C: Then, we observed the sway of the smoke from the fire. Did it sway to the opposing side across the river, or it did it sway to our side of the river? It was so funny, of course the smoke did not go across, eh, the wind, if you could only guess, of course it would not just go across,
L: Okay.
C: Of course the smoke would go nowhere, it was a cooking fire and it was called the *enselua* fire.And, with the rest of the crowd, we were trying to observe on what is going on the other side,
L: Okay,
C: Crowds from both sides of the river can be heard, "Who is representing the other side? Who? Who will represent your side? How Would I know? No one tells us anything. Did you see who is representing your side? Our champions are so and so, What about yours?" We asked Dunggat from Long Brayang, about who their champions were. Just like the two champions from Mujah's side. Both (crowds)/sides were not allowed to swim or go over to the opposite sides,
L: Okay.
C: We cannot go over to the other side, to avoid leaked words, and when the time has come, then a champion is called from each side.
L: Okay.
C: That is why the *miring* was not done many times. Only one *miring* done for going under the water. The 9 *piring* prepared were observed before a champion went under water.
L: Okay.
C: The champions were escorted,
L: Both of them? The same champions who slept with the *piring* in the prepared square?
C: Yes, and we asked which champion would actually go underwater? The one who had walked in front would be the actual champion. The second champion must walk behind him. The second champion was only accompanying the first,
L: Okay.
S: The actual champion would prepare himself, wearing only a loincloth, and seeing him preparing, finally we know who will go underwater,
L: Okay.
C: the loincloth will be secured starting from his hips, and the opponent's champion did the same from the opposite side of the river.
L: Elder father, the opponent also had two champions. And they slept with a *piring* too?
C: I don't know about the opponent at the opposite side of the river. From our side, there were two.
L: Oh, okay.
C: I do not know about the opposite side of the river; therefore I cannot describe on what went on there,
L: okay, so you witnessed the Brayang side? You sided with Talak?
C: Both were from Brayang,
L: okay, both were from Brayang,
C: Yes, both were from Brayang, one stayed in the longhouse, one stayed in his farm. Mujah stayed in his own farm.
L: Therefore, all your descriptions were from the Mujah's side?

C: Yes, from the Mujah's side of things. I do not know what was going on with the opponent's preparation. Mujah's father was against his own son going underwater even though he agreed with the trial to resolve the land dispute.
L: Ah.
C: That is why, they were confident with the trial. Mujah's father himself had a won a dispute over house construction logs through *kelam ai*. He was arguing with the late Entigu. Entigu lost the trial and his claims over the disputed logs. Mujah's father had won. Then, when it came to his own son, Mujah, he was against his son going under water because the omen did not look favourable towards his son.
L: Okay.
C: Therefore, they had sought for a champion for him and found a man named Anju from Kaba,
L: Okay.
C: They sought Anju's help and did not tell anyone. Because we cannot talk about this kind of things, after securing Anju's agreement, they saw a deer on their right,
L: Okay,
C: Anju's right. Then it was kept secret. They were not allowed to tell anyone. Anju was confident to go underwater after witnessing the favourable omen.
L: Okay.
C: Anju knew that he was going under water after experiencing good omens. However, no one knew that. There were two champions, but we do not know who would go underwater, which was going underwater.The *kelam ai*, the way of the *kelam ai.*
L: Who won, elder father? Mujah?
C: Mujah won, Talak lost.
L: Was it because Talak's champion came out of the water first?
C: He went unconscious. Unconscious. He had not enough air, he was unconscious, and water filled his body,
L: Okay.
C: He was unconscious,
L: yes, probably drowning,
C: There was a rope attached to each champion,
L: Okay.
C: When Anju's rope was tugged, he responded by doing the same. But the opponent had released his rope,
L: Okay.
C: And Talak saw his champion lost, because the water was very clear,
L: Yes.
C: Anju in his loincloth still laying deep in the waters,
L: Oh, Elder father, so now the result of the trial is known, what happens next? What about land ownership?
S: The one who wins got the land,
L: Okay.
C: and they report themselves to the authorities, *after the kelam ai*,
L: Okay.
C: They were penalised, both sides were penalised, and the value of punishment today would be around 40 ringgit and 70 cents.

Excerpt 6.22: Cherang – narration of the *kelam ai*

C: There were no rules and regulations. And when disputes happened, they just decided to have the *kelam ai* to settle the disagreement. Those people like the leader Gerinau were not competent enough to settle simple disputes like this.
L: Therefore, when they have any disagreement, their first option to settle it is by proposing the *kelam ai*?
C: Yes, right away the *kelam ai*.

6.6.1 Analysis and discussion

In the Iban tradition, coming of age allowed an Iban man to perform the *bejalai*, or travel the world, as one of his rites of passage into manhood. *Bejalai* also means to go on a journey, and it is used by the Iban to describe the journey undertaken for material profit and social prestige (Freeman 1955, pp. 24, 222–26). This coming of age allows an Iban man to join in hunting food hunting the jungle, perform the warrior dance and the *miring,* participate in headhunting (before it was banned) and, in Cherang's case, witness the *kelam ai*. Underage Ibans were not allowed to participate in the *kelam ai*. So, when he said, "I was already a man", Cherang was validating his claim as a young man witnessing an important event.

In studying Cherang's narrative about *kelam ai,* I refer to Deumert (2022) proposal that the sociolinguistics of the spectres recognises the sensuous and affective nature of social life, challenging traditional boundaries and binaries. This approach encourages researchers to seek out and make visible the spectral elements in social practices, aligning with Derrida's (1993) idea of engaging with ghosts rather than excluding them from research.

Excerpt 6.21

Cherang's detailed account of the *kelam ai* ritual provides a vivid illustration of how offerings and spiritual beliefs are deeply integrated into the Iban community's social and judicial practices. The *kelam ai* is a traditional trial by water used to resolve disputes, such as land ownership conflicts, which could not be settled by the longhouse community.

Cherang explains that for the *kelam ai*, the highest attributes of *piring,* or food offerings, are prepared. Specifically, nine types of food offerings are required, with each type divided into nine portions. This meticulous preparation underscores the ritual's seriousness and the respect shown to the spiritual entities involved. Cherang states, "For a *kelam ai*, the highest attributes of *piring*, of food offerings were prepared. Therefore, for a *kelam ai*, it has to be 9 *piring*."

The ritual involves not only the disputing parties but also the broader community, reflecting its communal and spiritual nature. The participants and community members engage in various activities, including the recitation of chants and the sounding of drums and gongs, creating an atmosphere that blends the spiritual and social aspects of Iban life.

Before the actual *kelam ai*, the champions undergo a night of preparation, including sleeping within a square area gated with traditional woven clothes. The next morning, they are questioned about any dreams they had, which are interpreted as omens regarding the outcome of the trial. This practice highlights the importance of spectral communication, as dreams are considered messages from the spiritual realm guiding the trial's outcome.

The trial itself involves the champions diving into the water, with their performance determining the dispute's outcome. The community closely observes the proceedings, including the behaviour of the smoke from the cooking fire and the actions of the champions underwater. This element of the ritual emphasises the tangible interaction with the spectral world, as the champions' fate is believed to be influenced by the spirits.

Cherang's account of the *kelam ai* ritual exemplifies Deumert's (2022) study by making the spectral elements of Iban life visible. The detailed preparation of *piring*, the interpretation of dreams, and the communal engagement all reflect the sensuous and affective nature of social life that Deumert (2022) describes.

Sutlive and Sutlive (2001) assert that no ritual activity is observed without offerings. Cherang's narrative supports this claim, demonstrating how the *piring* is an essential part of the *kelam ai* ritual. The offerings serve as a means of communication with the spiritual realm, seeking favour or forgiveness from the spirits involved.

Cherang's narrative also highlights the role of spectral communication in the *kelam ai* ritual. The interpretation of dreams and the preparation of offerings are means through which the Iban engages with the spiritual world, ensuring that the spirits' guidance influences the trial's outcome. This aligns with Deumert's (2022) call to seek out and listen to ghosts, integrating their presence into our understanding of social practices.

The *kelam ai* ritual exemplifies spectral thinking by demonstrating the interconnectedness of the past, present, and future. The ritual is not merely a method of conflict resolution but a way of engaging with the spiritual realm, where the voices of ancestors and spirits influence the

present and shape the future. This aligns with the idea that spectral thinking can unsettle traditional notions of agency by incorporating non-human influences into social practices.

Excerpt 6.22

Cherang's account of the *kelam ai* ritual provides a compelling illustration of how spectral elements are deeply integrated into the Iban community's conflict resolution practices. His narrative highlights the reliance on spiritual and spectral communication in resolving disputes when traditional leadership is perceived as ineffective.

Cherang describes how, in the absence of effective leadership, the community would often resort to *kelam ai* to settle disputes. He states, "There were no rules and regulations. And when disputes happened, they just decided to have the *kelam ai* to settle the disagreement. Those people like the leader Gerinau were not competent enough to settle simple disputes like this." This immediate recourse to *kelam ai* underscores the community's trust in spiritual intervention over human mediation.

Cherang's narrative emphasises the spiritual dimension of the *kelam ai*, where the outcomes of the trial are believed to be influenced by spiritual forces. This practice reflects a deep-rooted belief in the agency of spirits in guiding human affairs, as Deumert (2022) suggests. The *kelam ai* ritual thus serves as a medium for spectral communication, where the spirits are actively engaged in the community's conflict resolution process.

Sutlive and Sutlive (2001) emphasise that offerings are central to Iban rituals, serving as a means of communication with spirits and deities. Cherang's account supports this claim, demonstrating how the preparation and presentation of offerings are integral to the *kelam ai* ritual. These offerings facilitate spectral communication, ensuring that the spirits' guidance influences the trial's outcome.

The *kelam ai* ritual illustrates how the Iban community incorporates spectral thinking into their conflict resolution practices. By relying on spiritual guidance rather than human mediation, the community challenges conventional notions of agency and highlights the interconnectedness of human and non-human influences. This aligns with Deumert's call to listen to and seek out ghosts, integrating their presence into our understanding of social practices.

Despite its ban, studying the *kelam ai* ritual is crucial for understanding the Iban community's cultural heritage and social organisation. The ritual provides insights into the community's reliance on spiritual intervention in conflict resolution and the importance of offerings in facilitating spectral communication. This knowledge is essential for preserving cultural traditions and understanding the sociolinguistic dynamics of the Iban community.

Conclusion

Cherang's narrative of the *kelam ai* ritual reveals the intricate interplay between spiritual beliefs, offerings, and conflict resolution in Iban culture. By integrating theoretical insights from Deumert (2022) and Sutlive and Sutlive (2001) with empirical data from Cherang's account demonstrates that the *kelam ai* ritual exemplifies the sociolinguistics of the spectres and the importance of spectral communication. This analysis underscores the need to include spectral elements in sociolinguistic research to fully grasp the cultural practices and social organisation of the Iban community, highlighting the relevance of studying traditional rituals like *kelam ai* despite their contemporary prohibition.

Chapter summary

In summary this chapter starts with an examination of rice planting, highlighting its sacred significance in connecting the community to the natural world and the cycles of life. As the harvest season approaches, rituals surrounding welcoming guests and celebrating weddings further demonstrate the Iban's reverence for tradition and their belief in the presence of ancestral spirits. Additionally, important to the chapter is the exploration of *Gawai*, the harvest festival that transcends mere festivity to become a sacred communion with ancestral spirits and divine forces. Within the sanctified space of the longhouse, the rituals of *Gawai* unfold. The offering of *piring*, (food offerings), and libations plays a central role in these rituals, serving as a conduit for spectral communication between the living and the spirit world. And conflict resolution rituals such as *kelam ai*, which symbolise the seeking of justice and resolution through spectral means.

Incorporating hauntology, the chapter underscores how these rituals serve as tangible manifestations of the past, haunting the present with the presence of ancestral spirits and cultural traditions. The blurring of boundaries between past and present, seen and unseen, reflects the ongoing resonance of historical legacies in shaping Iban religious identity and cultural practices. Through the lens of hauntology, the chapter deepens our understanding of spectral communication as a dynamic and enduring aspect of Iban spirituality.

In the next chapter I will discuss the analysis and findings for mediators of spectral communication.

Chapter Seven: Mediators of Spectral Communication

"*I am cursed by the spirits. That is why I am a lemambang*" Lambat.

Introduction

This chapter seeks to analyse the central role of the pivotal role of ritual specialists in enacting spectral communication, *sampi* and trophy heads in ritual performances. The ritual specialists -*lemambang*- are mediators between the living and the unseen. Through exploration of the nuances of *sampi*-based rituals, the chapter gains insight into how linguistic expressions intersect with spiritual forces to facilitate spectral communication. Moreover, the agents of the trophy heads may be invoked as conduits for communication with ancestral spirits. Trophy heads serve as tangible representations of ancestral presence and spiritual power. Within the sacred space of the *miring* ceremony, these revered artefacts become focal points for spiritual communication, anchoring the ritual in the realm of the supernatural and facilitating contact with the spirit world.

In this chapter, I present findings on the following:

1) ritual specialists who employ chants to invoke ancestral spirits, convey messages, and establish reciprocal relationships with the spectral realm.

2) narratives about how spectral communication unfolds during ritual performances involving *sampi*.

3) the cultural significance of trophy heads as communicative artefacts within the Iban community. I will analyse how these trophy heads serve as tangible links to the spectral realm, facilitating communication with ancestral spirits through ritual practices such as *miring* and *Gawai* ceremonies.

7.1 Mediation of spiritual messages by ritual specialists

The *lemambang*, who are traditionally known for their role, can be likened to priests or officiants. They take the lead in public invocations and preside over the *Gawai*, which is the

most elaborate ritual within an Iban longhouse. Unlike soul guides and *manang*, who usually operate individually, *lemambang* typically perform their duties as part of a group or troupe. Sutlive and Sutlive (2001) characterise *lemambang* as bardic priests or spiritual warriors as well as skilled cantors or singers. These descriptions highlight their abilities to not only compose, but also recite lengthy poetic pieces known as *pengap* or *timang* (chants) that hold great significance in all ritual activities. My study participants include five *lemambang* (Daud, Cherang, Chendan, Lambat and Belayong) and all of them can also function as a *manang* or shaman.

Excerpt 7.1: Daud – life as a *lemambang*

> When I was an adult, I was asked to perform and lead the *miring* in my own longhouse because there was no one else who could do it. Not only I led the *miring* ceremony, but I also led the invocation of the gods with chants. At first, I only knew basic chants, but not as elaborate as my late grandfather's chants…When you are a well-known *lemambang* (bard), they already have you in mind to perform the *miring*. And a bard cannot run away from his duties.
> At that time, when we travel and visit other longhouses, our host will welcome you and at the same time will teach and guide you on how *miring* is prepared and performed. So, why would you refuse such a gracious offer?
> Therefore, with these *miring* practices, I learn to perform the *miring*. I only knew Christians were not allowed to practise *miring* after some time. And I cannot deny that many Iban Christians in Sarawak no longer practise the *miring*.
> Another thing that I want to share with you when we run political campaigns and the fielded candidate happens to be a Malay (all Malays are Muslims), he will not be able to 'hunt the boar'. A Malay would be scared. So, I would be doing the honour. That is one of the highest honours to be given to a guest. A pig would be brought to the front steps of the longhouse. The pig would be given food and offerings. After that the guest of honour is supposed to 'hunt' and kill the pig with a spear.

Excerpt 7.2: Cherang – the *lemambang* who does not call himself *lemambang*

> Yes, I am very familiar with it, but I did not perform it myself. I was only an observer.
> L: That time?
> C: Yes, I have observed many. And, after sometime becoming a *penghulu*, I must perform it myself. And the elders had insisted on it. They let us watch,
> L: Yes
> C: And whenever there is a *miring* ceremony, the elders will always ask us to sit closely and observe.
> L: So, you were merely an observer?
> C: Yes, just observing. Observing my late father, the late grandfather Li, the late father of Enggah, and I joined these elders in observing the ceremony.

Excerpt 7.3: Chendan – a confident *lemambang*

I can call myself a bard, yes. I said so because I am a person of reference and I am always invited to perform the *miring* whenever there is a *Gawai antu* or Significant ritual for the dead. I am called to invoke the gods and ancestors and I have my own 'bard circle'. Therefore, I am confident that I am a bard. In 2019, I was called to perform invocation of the gods during *Gawai antu* in Padeh. I also perform invocation of the gods for our neighbouring longhouses and once for the longhouse of our former minister Datu' Patinggi Jabu.
I started by observing the elders in my longhouse. The elders practised *miring* and performed it on many occasions. They said "If you do not learn the ritual from us right now, you would not inherit anything about our tradition. And everything will be lost if we die." That is why I started observing the elders performing the *miring*.
The elders would always gather us to watch them perform the *miring*.
I observed the elders and I learned to chant in preparing my offerings. I am often invited to chant and invoke the gods for *miring* not only in our longhouse, but also other longhouses. They invited me for incantations, and for many other occasions. Especially now that I am a community leader, they often look to me to perform the *miring*.

Excerpt 7.4: Lambat– the cursed *lemambang*

l: The spirits/ ghosts did not curse anyone else. It was only me.

L: Right. Curses. What about your family, anyone who became Christians?
And you did not join Christianity because you are a *lemambang*?

l: I have a practice licence from the Sarawak government. I brought my bardic staff to Simanggang and I performed the significant ritual in the Kuching stadium.I have performed healing rituals in Niah, Brunei and Limbang. I have been invited to perform healing rituals to many faraway places. And so is *nimang jalong* (significant healing ritual). I have been invited to many places. I was invited by many people; I was the best in my trade. Many other *lemambang* tried to outperform me but I was simply the best.

Excerpt 7.5: Belayong – the young *lemambang*

One of the reasons for me to learn and practise the old way is because I was very interested in it. As soon as I knew the meanings of my surroundings, when I was around 10 to 11 years old, I enjoyed attending many rituals in the longhouse. These rituals involved healings, harvests and I was very interested in the rituals. I had always asked about the rituals from grandfather and he would tell me to the best of his ability. What is that for, how is it done, everything. Whatever he can tell of these rituals, he will explain them all to me. However, when I was in form 2, (14 years old) my grandfather passed away.

7.1.1 Analysis and discussion

Excerpt 7.1

According to Deumert (2022), the concept of spectral communication extends beyond conventional linguistic interactions, embracing the invisible and inaudible forces that shape social practices (Deumert, 2022, p. 1). This perspective is evident in Daud's account, where the role of a lemambang involves mediating between the human and spirit worlds through chants and rituals. Daud's journey underscores the importance of these non-verbal forms of communication, which are integral to the cultural fabric of the Iban community.

Daud's initial exposure to basic sampi and his gradual improvement of more elaborate ones illustrate the process of learning and acquiring cultural knowledge, akin to Deumert's (2022) emphasis on the transformative power of spectral communication (Deumert, 2022, p. 2). His role as a *lemambang*, despite his conversion to Christianity, highlights the tension between traditional practices and new belief systems. This aligns with Deumert's notion of the sensuous and affective nature of social life, where cultural shifts and personal transformations are continually negotiated (Deumert, 2022, p. 2).

The communal expectation for Daud to perform the *miring* rites, despite the decline in such practices among some Iban Christians, reflects the enduring importance of these rituals. Deumert (2022) argues that spectral communication practices are deeply intertwined with broader sociolinguistic traditions, a point exemplified by Daud's experiences (Deumert, 2022, p. 3). His involvement in *miring* ceremonies during his cooperative travels further demonstrates how these practices are embedded in the community's social and political life.

Daud's narrative also touches on the cultural and symbolic importance of certain rituals, such as the honour of 'hunting the boar'. This task's significance, highlighted by the exclusion of a Malay (Muslim) candidate, underscores the complicated relationship between ritual traditions and social identity. Deumert's (2022) research helps us understand these practices not merely as rituals but as vital elements of the community's sociolinguistic landscape (Deumert, 2022, p. 4).

Excerpt 7.2

Cherang's narrative highlights the gradual transition from observer to performer, which underscores the passing of cultural and ritual responsibilities to the next generation. This method of knowledge transmission is consistent with Deumert's (2022) emphasis on the

transformative power of spectral communication and the importance of non-verbal forms of knowledge (Deumert, 2022, p. 2). By observing the *miring* ceremonies, Cherang could internalise the chants, rituals, and the overall structure of *miring*, which later allowed him to perform these rituals effectively.

Moreover, Cherang's journey as a penghulu, where he was not only encouraged but also entrusted by elders to perform the *miring*, exemplifies the pivotal role of community leaders in upholding and transmitting these cultural practices. This exemplification is a testament to the broader sociolinguistic tradition, where the transmission of knowledge and expertise is not just crucial, but also a responsibility for the preservation of cultural identity and social cohesion. Deumert (2022) further delves into how spectral communication practices are intricately woven into broader sociolinguistic traditions, thereby underscoring the role of community leaders in maintaining these practices (Deumert, 2022, p. 3).

Cherang's account also serves as a mirror to the communal expectations and the sociopolitical dynamics within the Iban community. The encouragement from elders and the community's expectations for leaders to perform the *miring* not only underscore the cultural significance of these rituals, but also the depth of the Iban community's cultural heritage. This resonance with Deumert's (2022) research, which emphasises the interconnectedness of cultural practices, social roles, and spectral communication within sociolinguistic traditions (Deumert, 2022, p. 4), further deepens our understanding of the Iban *miring*.

Excerpt 7.3

Chendan’s experiences provide further insight into the processes of knowledge transmission and the importance of ritual practices within the Iban community. His narrative, similar to those of Daud and Cherang, highlights the dynamic nature of cultural practices and the integral role of community leaders in preserving these traditions.

Like Daud and Cherang, Chendan’s narrative highlights the significance of learning by observing elders, a critical aspect of the sociolinguistic tradition in the Iban community. This resonates with Deumert’s (2022) emphasis on the transformative power of spectral communication and the importance of non-verbal forms of knowledge (Deumert, 2022, p. 2). By watching the elders prepare for rituals, Chendan learns and performs the ritual himself when ready.

The communal expectation for Chendan to perform the *miring* rites and his frequent invitations to other longhouses reflect the enduring significance of these rituals. Deumert (2022) argues that spectral communication practices are deeply intertwined with broader sociolinguistic traditions, a point exemplified by Chendan's experiences (Deumert, 2022, p. 3). His active involvement in the *miring* rituals and his role as a bard contributes to the continuity and preservation of these practices within the Iban community.

Chendan's account not only underscores the communal recognition of his expertise and the integration of spiritual and leadership roles within Iban culture, but also highlights the active role of the community in preserving these traditions. His ability to continue in the oral tradition and his willingness to engage in these traditions ensure that cultural and sociolinguistic knowledge is passed down and remains vibrant. This reflects Deumert's (2022) notion that spectral communication practices are essential for maintaining social cohesion and cultural identity (Deumert, 2022, p. 4).

Moreover, Chendan's confident self-identification as a bard and his consistent invitations to perform significant rituals, such as *Gawai antu,* not only highlight his prestige and expertise in the community, but also underline the interconnectedness of cultural practices and social roles. Being called upon to invoke the gods and ancestors signifies the importance of his role and underscores the cultural significance of these rituals. This aligns with Deumert's (2022) framework, which emphasises the interconnectedness of cultural practices, social roles, and spectral communication within sociolinguistic traditions (Deumert, 2022, p. 5).

Excerpt 7.4

In a different take enroute to becoming a ritual specialist, Lambat mentions that the spirits or ghosts singled him out for curses, suggesting that his role as a *lemambang* might have attracted particular attention or responsibilities in dealing with the spirit world. This highlights the potential risks and challenges associated with his role in spectral communication. Lambat mentions having a practice licence from the Sarawak government, which indicates formal recognition of his role as a *lemambang*. This recognition underscores the significance of the *lemambang* tradition within the broader sociolinguistic and cultural context of Sarawak.

Lambat's reference to performing a significant ritual in the Kuching stadium highlights the public and communal aspects of his role. Performing rituals in a public arena such as a stadium suggests that the *lemambang* tradition continues to be relevant and practised in contemporary

settings. Lambat's role as a *lemambang* involves not only engaging with spirits but also contributing to the preservation of cultural heritage. By participating in rituals and invoking spirits, he occupies a critical role in maintaining the sociolinguistic and spiritual traditions of the Iban community. His narrative demonstrates the complex interplay between spectral communication, sociolinguistic traditions, and individual choices within the Iban culture. His role as a *lemambang* involves dealing with curses and navigating the relationship between traditional beliefs and Christianity.

Excerpt 7.5

Belayong's early interest in rituals, starting at around 10 or 11 years old, signifies the role of spiritual practices in the Iban community. His narrative orients with Deumert's (2022) emphasis on social life's sensuous and affective nature (Deumert, 2022, p. 2). The mentorship he received from his grandfather highlights the traditional method of knowledge transmission through observation and active participation. This process is crucial for maintaining the cultural fabric of the Iban community.

As Belayong transitioned from observer to participant and eventually to an active participant and learner-bard, his experiences exemplify the transformative power of spectral communication discussed by Deumert (2022). His increasing involvement in rituals, supported by his grandfather's guidance, underscores the importance of non-verbal forms of communication and the affective dimensions of learning (Deumert, 2022, p. 3). This gradual transition ensures that cultural and sociolinguistic knowledge is preserved and remains vibrant within the community.

The narrative of Belayong's ethereal visits from his deceased grandfather, where he continues to receive guidance through dreams, further exemplifies Deumert's (2022) notion of spectral communication. These dreams consolidate Belayong's beliefs and reinforce his role in performing the *miring*. This ongoing connection with his grandfather, even after his passing, highlights these traditions' continuity and dynamic nature (Deumert, 2022, p. 4).

Belayong's account underscores the communal recognition of his expertise and the integration of spiritual and leadership roles within the Iban culture. His active participation in *miring* ceremonies and his self-identification as a bard highlight his prestige and expertise in the community. This aligns with Deumert's (2022) framework, which emphasises the

interconnectedness of cultural practices, social roles, and spectral communication within sociolinguistic traditions (Deumert, 2022, p. 5).

Conclusion

Daud's persistence in performing the *miring* despite religious conversion, Cherang's obligation-driven participation, Chendan's respected position due to his skills, and Belayong's guided journey through dreams and mentorship all reflect the dynamic nature of becoming a *lemambang*. These narratives demonstrate how cultural and spiritual knowledge is transmitted and sustained within the Iban community, ensuring that the role of the *lemambang* remains vital in mediating between the living and the spirit worlds of the Ibans.

7.2 *Sampi* (chants)

Sampi is seen as a tool for an intergenerational transmission of knowledge, passing words of wisdom and philosophy from one generation to the other (Ensiring 2014, p. 48). In Excerpt 7.6, Cherang stresses that approval and help from the spirit world is necessary and demonstrates a chant to invoke the water world spirits or river kings. He invites the spirits to help settle a dispute between the two parties involved. In Excerpt 7.7, Cherang recalls his chant for performing the *nampok* ritual in the past and in Excerpt 7.8, Lambat's *sampi* is a present-day representation of the invocatory chant.

Excerpt 7.6: Cherang – *sampi* for *kelam ai*

> It was important to call for assistance from the spirit world. The spirits and ancestors can offer strength. But for this reason, the type of chant was dark in nature. It went like this:
>
> *We call for the King of the spirits, King of the fishes,*
> *King of the otters*
> *King of the deep waters, King Gumba,*
> *We have a dispute to settle*
> *We seek a trial by water*
> *Our dispute is for our land, in our human world,*
> *Therefore, we seek for your support,*
> *We seek for your help,*
> *We seek for your justice,*

We seek for advice from you, the elder ones,
They are cheating us, curse them,
The fish spirits, the otter spirits, summon them to catch, summon them to restrain,
Let them lose
Let them fall
Strangle their life, let them die,
Let them feel discomfort,
They are unjust

Excerpt 7.7: Cherang – *sampi* for *nampok*

One of us is feeling ill, feeling unwell, feeling unease, therefore we call for you, you from the hills, you from the skies, you from the winds, you from the top of the world, you from the grounds, we call upon Keling Bungai Nuing, let him come, let him arrive,
If the Kelings are unable to come, we call upon for the Ghostly Giants

This man is gravely ill, his illness can never leave,
If you, the Ghostly Giant is unable to heal him, let him die. You gobble, you devour, you swallow him whole. Don't let him live. Let him die. He dies, he is no burden.

Excerpt 7.8: Lambat – *sampi* for prosperity

Oo hoi oo hoi oo hoi oo
I cry out but not in vain, I greet but not in vain, I call but not in vain,
I did not stop, and I call out
I call out the son of Uda, I call out the son of man, I call out the son of Iban, I call out the son of Sengayan,
Maybe they are occupied,
Maybe they have small rituals
Maybe they have significant rituals

Oo hoi
Therefore, I brought for times of offerings
for ading, for bedauh for the fallen times,
the late Radi
the late Besi
the late Kumbang
the late Pasang
Those who yearns to receive paddy, will continue to receive paddy
Those who yearns to receive the buntih, will receive the buntih

Oo hoi Ooo
Small steps uphill, small steps downhill,
planting the seeds

grow the slaves, grow the paddy, grow the branches, grow Lilut
Therefore, I call, oh who do I call, who do I seek, where do I go?
Oh, Lilut should call for no one but you
I call for Semerugah, the King of the earth, I call for Sempulang Gana, the King of the rice spirits, of all spirits
Semerugah, to you belong the soils, to you belong the lands

We plough our land, grow the slaves, grow the animals, grow the paddy,
When Lilut the bard calls for the paddy, paddy go from her feet to the valley, from her feet to the hills,
The wind dances amongst the paddy, its leaves waves, its branches in full,
Paddy is bountiful and the harvest is plenty
Sempulang Gana Raja Sewa Raja Limpai is pleased,
The one who asked is favoured.
Paddy earned its slave. Lilut is not in vain. She calls for us, we did not come in empty handed,

We brought the stone of Gumbang, we brought the stone of Pasang, we brought the stone of Ai, we brought the stone of Raja
She calls for us, we did not come empty handed,
We brought the stone of Idu, we brought the stone of Gayu
Therefore, we favour Lilut
End of the dibbling
She will be like the spring water, flowing to the river
She will be like the soil
The soil plough will become the hill
She will be like waterfall
And her staff will hold the sky
Paddy comes to her
Paddy comes to her
We did not come in vain
We lifted her with the Idu stone
She prospers the land
She floats the waters

Thank you, that is all.

7.2.1 Analysis and discussion

Sampi among the Ibans are complex cultural and spiritual practices. From a traditional perspective, invocation chants are an integral part of Iban religious and spiritual beliefs. These chants are performed during various rituals and ceremonies to communicate with and invoke the spirits and deities from the Iban pantheon. They are believed to have the power to connect the human world with the spirit world and facilitate communication with the supernatural realm. The chants often contain intricate linguistic and poetic elements, making them both a

means of communication and a form of artistic expression. They serve as a bridge between the Iban community and their spiritual beliefs, reinforcing cultural values and social cohesion.

Here, I explore the understanding that 'hauntology' adds to interpretation of the Iban invocation chants in Excerpts 7.6 and 7.7 Cherang recalls *sampi* from a *kelam ai* as well as for *nampok* that he performed to seek healing or death for a patient. Lambat's version of chant seeks bountiful harvest and prosperity.

Excerpt 7.6

Deumert (2022) suggests that the dead are not merely material remains but possess agency, continuing to shape the present and future. The past seeps into the present, making forgetting impossible. This idea aligns with the Iban practice of *kelam ai*, where ancestral spirits are engaged to address contemporary disputes. By invoking these spirits, the Iban acknowledge the persistent influence of the past on the present, recognising that these spectral presences must be actively engaged with to maintain social and spiritual harmony, (Deumert, 2022, p. 7). Cherang's analysis of the *kelam ai* ritual highlights the Iban's practice of seeking approval and help from the spirit world. The ritual begins with a series of invocations addressing various spirits or entities by their respective titles, emphasising their powers and authority in the spirit world. This practice underscores the belief in the power of language and communication with the supernatural to influence real-world outcomes.

Gordon (2011) describes haunting as an emergent state that demands attention and action. When repression fails, ghosts emerge, signalling unresolved issues that require re-narrativisation and response, (Gordon, 2011, p.3). This concept aligns with the Iban practice of addressing past wrongs and seeking justice through *kelam ai* rituals, demonstrating how haunting actively shapes present actions and future possibilities.

Deumert's (2022) call to embrace the spectral and the affective responses amplified through sound parallels the Iban's use of sampi during *kelam ai* rituals. These soundscapes create a bridge between the physical and spiritual realms, allowing the community to communicate with their ancestors and seek their protection and guidance. This *sampi* also shows the attitude of respect and deference the Ibans bestow towards their spirits (Freeman 1955, p. 155). But instead of showing such attitudes and deference while requesting favours, Cherang seeks help from the spirits to curse and punish any wrongdoing that caused the dispute. The *sampi*, or chant, shows the respect and deference the Ibans bestow upon their spirits while also

commanding them to take specific actions to resolve disputes. The repetition of the phrase “we seek” emphasises the urgency and importance of the request, highlighting the determination to resolve their dispute with the spirits' assistance. The sampi clearly states the nature of the dispute, usually involving land, and serves as the central issue around which the chant revolves. This *sampi* is described as ‘dark’ by Cherang himself because it seeks punishment and includes curses directed at those perceived as unjust. Phrases like “Let them lose, let them fall, strangle their life, let them die, let them feel discomfort” illustrate the severity of the curses, emphasising the quest for justice.

This curse serves as a form of retribution, calling upon the spirits to punish or harm those cheating the speakers. He utters, “*Let them lose, let them fall, strangle their life, let them die, let them feel discomfort*”. Cherang implies this was necessary to beget justice for the innocent party. The speakers beseech the spirits for support, help, and justice. They seek guidance and assistance in resolving their dispute, implying that the spirits have the power to influence the outcome. Cherang’s *sampi* uses imperative verbs, as in “summon them to catch” and “summon them to restrain”; with “strangle their life”, these convey a sense of authority and control over the spirits. The speakers are commanding the spirits to take specific actions. This resonates with Hollan (2020) who differentiates between real ghosts and secondary haunting. Real ghosts engage directly with the haunted, seeking immediate reparation, while secondary haunting involves mediating stories to arouse collective consciousness and mobilise societal changes. This distinction highlights the immediate impact of spectral presences versus broader efforts to address historical injustices, (Hollan, 2020, p. 454). Hollan's differentiation resonates with the Iban's immediate engagement with spectral presences through rituals like *kelam ai*. These rituals seek direct reparation and justice, reflecting the personal and immediate nature of real ghosts' demands.

Cherang's narrative of *kelam ai* provides a comprehensive understanding of the Iban's cultural and spiritual practices. The Iban's methods of communicating with spirits, gods, and ancestors through *miring* practices are deeply embedded in their social and linguistic structures. These practices are not only about honouring the past but also about maintaining a balanced and harmonious present and future. By listening to ghosts and acknowledging their presence, the Iban ensure that their cultural identity and social cohesion are preserved, reflecting the profound connection between their cultural practices and the ongoing influence of historical spectres. This sophisticated interplay between the seen and unseen worlds underscores the

Iban's spiritual and communal life, highlighting both the specific rituals of *kelam ai* and the broader communication methods with their spiritual pantheon

Excerpt 7.7

From a sociolinguistics perspective, the *sampi* appears to be a plea or invocation to supernatural entities, specifically Keling Bungai Nuing and the Ghostly Giants, to heal a gravely ill person. Analysis of the sociolinguistic dynamics involved in the performance of this chant begins with an invocation addressing the entities by name and specifying their origins from the hills and from the skies. This establishes a connection between the human realm and the supernatural. Repetition of the phrase "we call for you" emphasises the urgency and seriousness of the situation. It indicates the speakers' desperation for intervention from these supernatural beings.

Cherang's *sampi nampok* describes the illness in terms of the person feeling "unwell" and "uneasy". This description conveys the suffering and discomfort experienced by the afflicted individual. The primary purpose of the chant is to request healing for the gravely ill person. Cherang implores Keling Bungai Nuing and the Ghostly Giants to come and heal the afflicted individual. The phrase "*you gobble, you devour, you swallow him whole*" invokes the supernatural power of the Ghostly Giants. It is a vivid description of the spirits' ability to consume or take away the illness. The *sampi* concludes with a stark wish for the gravely ill person to die if he cannot be healed, implying that death would be preferable to continued suffering.

Cherang's *sampi* for *nampok* is a manifestation of communication with the spirits. It reflects a belief in the power of language and communication with the spirit world to influence the outcome of illness. It holds deep cultural and ritual significance as a means of seeking supernatural intervention for healing.

Excerpt 7.8

Lambat shares a modern-day Iban *sampi* for prosperity. His *sampi* is a complex and rich narrative that appears part of an Iban ritual or ceremonial performance. It exhibits various linguistic structures, discourse patterns, and sociolinguistic dynamics. The *sampi* begins with a repetitive pattern of "oo hoi", which can be seen as an invocation or a call to attention. This repetition creates a rhythmic and ritualistic quality to the text. The *sampi* addresses a series of spirits or entities by calling out their names, such as "the son of Uda", "the son of man", and

"the son of Iban". This enumeration is a common feature in invocations and rituals and is used to establish a connection with the spiritual world.

Phrases such as "maybe they are occupied" and "maybe they have small rituals" introduce elements of uncertainty or ritual protocol. It suggests that the spirits may be preoccupied with their own activities. Lambat's text mentions bringing offerings "for times of offerings" and lists the names of individuals, probably ancestors or spirits. These offerings and rituals underline the importance of reciprocity with the spirit world. The *sampi* also calls upon natural elements and deities, such as Semerugah and Sempulang Gana, who are associated with the land and rice spirits. This aligns with the Iban cultural belief in the connection between agriculture and the spirit world.

Metaphors are used to describe the growth of paddy, as in "Paddy is bountiful and the harvest is plenty". These metaphors are symbolic of agricultural prosperity and abundance. Lambat's recitations emphasise reciprocity between the human and spirit worlds. The offerings and rituals are performed with the expectation of receiving blessings, such as a bountiful harvest. His *sampi* describes the transformation of Lilut (my Iban name), into a significant figure who can influence the land, water, and sky. This empowerment through ritual action is a common theme in contexts involving spirit communication.

Lambat's *sampi* is an expression of Iban culture, where language is intertwined with ritual, spirituality, and agricultural practices. It demonstrates how language is used to establish connections, seek blessings, and convey cultural values. It also reflects a worldview where linguistic communication plays a vital role in maintaining harmony with the spirit world, ensuring agricultural success, and reinforcing cultural identity.

Applying hauntology to *Iban sampi*, one can argue that these rituals are not just a means of invoking spirits. Rather, they are also a way of engaging with the cultural and historical past of the Iban people. The *sampi* connects the living with their ancestors and the spiritual entities, creating a spectral presence that transcends time and space. Hauntology allows for deeper exploration of the cultural memory and collective consciousness embedded in the chants. It highlights the persistence of cultural beliefs and practices from the past into the present as well as how they continue to shape the Iban community's identity and worldview.

This *sampi* demonstrates the belief in the power of language and communication with the spirit world to influence real-world outcomes. It involves a belief in the ability to communicate with supernatural entities to address earthly disputes.

Cherang's *sampi* for *nampok* is a manifestation of communication with the spirit. It reflects a belief in the power of language and communication with the spirit world to influence the outcome of illness. It holds deep cultural and ritual significance as a means of seeking supernatural intervention for healing.

Conclusion

Applying hauntology to *Iban sampi*, one can argue that these chants are not just a means of invoking spirits but also a way of engaging with the cultural and historical past of the Iban people. The *sampi* bridges the living with their ancestors and the spiritual entities, creating a spectral presence that transcends time and space. Hauntology allows for a deeper exploration of the cultural memory and collective consciousness embedded in the chants. It highlights the persistence of cultural beliefs and practices from the past into the present and how they continue to shape the Iban community's identity and worldview.

7.3 Communication with spirit world through appeasing trophy heads

Sutlive and Sutlive (2001) advocate for a clearer understanding of the use of trophy heads within ritual contexts. They compared the main symbolic interpretations put forth by Freeman (1979) and Davidson and Sutlive (1991). One of the central challenges in the anthropological study of headhunting as a cultural practice has been the connection between acquisition of these heads and fertility. Freeman (1979) argues that trophy heads have a phallic symbolism, drawing on psychoanalytic theory. On the other hand, Davidson and Sutlive (1991) suggest that a more comprehensive explanation can be found by examining the metaphors associated with the head in Iban rituals (Sutlive and Sutlive 2001).

Photographs 7.1–7.2: Trophy heads preserved in a longhouse

In the next two excerpts, 7.10 and 7.11, Chendan and Belayong share their opinions about trophy heads. Chendan is a community leader who is practising both Christianity and the old religion. Belayong practises the old Iban religion.

Excerpt 7.10: Chendan – on trophy heads and a hornbill head

> As for me and my longhouse and I represent my Christian longhouse members that we do not feel any conflicts in both our beliefs. Why am I confident about declaring this? Our longhouse keeps all of our ancestors' 'treasures'. Firstly, the most valuable 'treasure' kept in our longhouse is the hornbill. The hornbill is hundreds of years old. A few generations have kept and safeguard the hornbill. The hornbill is used for *Gawai Burung* or the significant healing ritual.
> Secondly, our longhouse has trophy heads. We have 5 large heaps of trophy heads in our common gallery. The nearest heap to my own family abode has 34 trophy heads. The heads were unsmoked, and they are hanging next door. My mother's brother has 28 trophy heads. The other heaps of trophy heads are also in the longhouse common gallery. The *miring* must be performed for these heads, especially during *Gawai*. These heads never requested food, but food offerings must be given to them during *Gawai*.

Excerpt 7.11: Belayong – on the consequences of removing trophy heads without *miring*

> Among the possible effects if you avoid the *miring* for the removal of trophy heads is you can become insane. Many people become insane, sick if they avoid the *miring* for the removal of trophy heads. Death would not come immediately, instead, the person would fall sick every month. If the animal enters and you did not have the *miring* ceremony, you would also be insane, sick and eventually die. Yes, many people said that everyone dies eventually, yes, but everything that happened has reasons.

7.3.2 Analysis and discussion

Excerpt 7.10

Chendan's description of the trophy heads as ‘treasures’ suggests their symbolic and spiritual significance within the longhouse community. Historically, the practice of taking trophy heads was believed to harness spiritual power for the community's benefit. Sutlive (1978) notes that after a skull had been cleaned, it was hung in a wicker casing in a prominent place on the veranda of the head-taker's family, as testimony to the courage of the hunter and in honour of the spirit of the skull. Neglect of it would result in some community calamity; to avert such misfortune, fires were lit on ceremonial occasions beneath the skull, and it was fed rice, (Sutlive, 1978, p.30). This historical context is supported by contemporary accounts from interviewees like Chendan, who emphasises the importance of performing *miring* rituals for the trophy heads, especially during *Gawai*. The presence of multiple stacks of trophy heads, some dating back several generations, indicates a long-standing tradition of preserving and revering these artefacts. The unsmoked and prominently displayed heads serve as reminders of the community's history, identity, and prowess in warfare.

Gordon (2011) discusses the concept of haunting, explaining that it brings spectres or ghosts into view and alters our perception of time. Haunting disrupts the linear sequence of past, present, and future by bringing to light what has been suppressed or concealed. According to Gordon, these spectres are not simply invisible or unknowable entities; rather, they have a real presence that demands attention. Haunting is a manifestation of unresolved social violence and loss, making it a domain of turmoil that calls for action, (Gordon, 2011, p.2).

This concept of haunting and the persistent presence of spectres is vividly illustrated in the Iban tradition of preserving and venerating trophy heads, as described by Chendan. The historical practice, as supported by contemporary accounts, underscores the importance of performing *miring* rituals for these trophy heads, particularly during significant events like *Gawai*.

Chendan emphasises that these heads are not merely historical relics but are imbued with a spectral presence that demands ongoing rituals and respect. This resonates with Gordon's assertion that haunting registers past and present social violence and demands action. The Iban's meticulous attention to these trophy heads through *miring* rituals exemplifies how

haunting operates within their cultural practices, ensuring that the spirits of the past remain acknowledged and honoured.

Thus, the Iban practice of maintaining and venerating trophy heads can be seen as a form of haunting that continually disrupts the linear progression of time. These heads symbolise the community's unresolved histories and their need to address the spectres of their past. The *miring* rituals performed for these heads are not just traditional practices but acts of engagement with these spectres, ensuring that the past remains a vital and acknowledged part of the present and future. This dynamic interaction with the spectral presence of trophy heads underscores the profound interplay between cultural practices and the ongoing influence of historical spectres in shaping the community's identity and social cohesion.

This underscores the continuity of cultural and religious practices within the longhouse community despite the adoption of Christianity. The performance of *miring* rituals for the trophy heads reflects a belief in the spiritual presence and agency of these ancestral artefacts, highlighting their ongoing significance in the lives of community members.

Sutlive (1978) explores the transformation of enmity into friendship through headhunting rituals. He explains that headhunting was rationalised to include former non-human enemies, where the victim was symbolically reborn into new relationships. The ritual activities associated with headhunting illustrate how enmity was transformed into a bond, reflecting a profound cultural mechanism for integrating past conflicts into the social fabric, (Sutlive, 1978, p.30).

Wadley (1999) further elaborates on the Iban belief system, emphasising the importance of adhering to adat, or customary law, which ensures order within both the natural and supernatural worlds. This order, described as celap, or ritually sound, is essential for maintaining balance. Transgressions of adat lead to angat, or a 'heated' state, characterised by physical, social, and supernatural distress, including illness, social chaos, and crop failure. To prevent such disorder, the Iban insist on observing adat, which includes regular rituals invoking spiritual beings, or *betara*, to aid them, (Wadley,1999, p.599).

Chendan's interview provides contemporary insights that align with these historical and cultural understandings. He emphasises the importance of performing *miring* rituals for the trophy heads, especially during *Gawai*. This practice suggests a belief in the active presence and influence of the ancestral spirits associated with these heads. By offering food during

Gawai, the community members acknowledge and honour the spirits of their ancestors, seeking their protection, guidance, and blessings for the coming year. Chendan also mentions the preservation of ancestral treasures, including a hornbill and trophy heads, in his Christian longhouse, indicating a continuity of these cultural practices even within a modern religious context.

The mention of the *Gawai burung* and *Gawai* rituals highlights the role of language and rituals in maintaining and transmitting cultural practices across generations. The reference to trophy heads implies a connection to ancestral spirits or the spirits of those whose heads were taken as trophies. While Chendan doesn't explicitly discuss spectral communication, these heads are likely considered objects of reverence and may have symbolic or spiritual significance. The mention that the trophy heads never requested food, but food offerings must be given to them during *Gawai* suggests an ongoing relationship with these spirits, where offerings are made to appease or honour them. This aligns with the idea of spectral communication, where spirits are acknowledged and engaged through rituals and offerings.

Chendan's narrative explores the persistence of the past in the present, as evidenced by the presence of these trophy heads and other ancestral 'treasures' within the Christian longhouse. Despite conversion to Christianity (see also Chapter 5.5), these relics from the past continue to exert influence and significance. The fact that these ancestral items are kept and maintained suggests that they continue to 'haunt' the present, serving as a tangible link to the cultural and spiritual heritage of the community. His narrative also highlights the complex interplay between cultural heritage, ritual tradition, spectral communication, and hauntology within the context of his Christian longhouse. These elements coexist, showcasing the multifaceted nature of belief systems and practices that persist over time.

Deumert's (2022) framework further contextualises these practices within the broader postcolonial experience. Deumert notes that apparitions, or spectral presences, are particularly visible and audible in postcolonial spaces, where the "forgetfulness of coloniality" has never been possible. These spaces, invested with effect, in which colonial powers sought to repress and marginalise cultures and economies, rendering them partially visible. This repression created "death-worlds" where vast populations are subjected to conditions of life that confer upon them the status of living dead, or ghosts (Mbembe, 2003, Deumert, 2022, p.10).

Applying Deumert's (2022) framework to the Iban context, the preservation and reverence of trophy heads can be seen as a form of resistance against historical marginalisation and repression. The trophy heads symbolise the community's ongoing engagement with their past, refusing to let their history and cultural practices be rendered invisible. The *miring* rituals, therefore, are not just acts of spiritual communication but also acts of reclaiming visibility and asserting cultural identity in a postcolonial world.

Excerpt 7.11

Meanwhile, Belayong's narrative highlights how ritual traditions, spectral communication, and hauntology intersect within the context of *miring* for the removal of trophy heads. The belief in the consequences of neglecting this ritual underscores the enduring influence of past practices and their linguistic and cultural significance. He discusses the importance of the *miring* ceremony for the removal of trophy heads within his cultural context. This ritual is a significant sociolinguistic tradition that involves the use of specific language, chants, and rituals to appease spirits and maintain harmony within the community. The mention of becoming “insane” or “sick” if the *miring* for the removal of trophy heads is avoided

The concept of listening to ghosts aligns, (Deumert, 2022, pp.11-12) with the Iban's belief in the sentient action of trophy heads, and the necessity of *miring* rituals to prevent calamity, (Sutlive, 1978, p.30). Sutlive's (1978) historical context highlights the cultural rationale behind these practices, emphasising their role in transforming enmity into friendship and integrating past conflicts into the community's social fabric. Belayong's account provides contemporary insights into the Iban's ritual practices and beliefs surrounding trophy heads. He mentions the severe consequences of neglecting *miring* rituals, suggesting that failure to perform these rituals for the removal of trophy heads can result in becoming "insane" or "sick" and this suggests a belief in spectral communication or interactions with the spirits associated with these heads. These spirits are believed to have the power to influence individual well-being and mental state, and the *miring* ceremony is a means of communicating with and placating these spirits. This reflects the deep-seated belief in the active presence and influence of ancestral spirits associated with the trophy heads.

Traces of hauntology are also evident from Belayong’s point of view that failing to perform the *miring* ceremony can lead to negative consequences, including ongoing suffering (“sick every month”) and eventual death. This belief reflects the idea that the past actions and spirits

continue to impact the present and future. The notion that “everything that happens has reasons” suggests a belief in the persistence of past actions and their effects, aligning with hauntological thought.

Szeman (2000) discusses the contemporary relevance of ghosts, suggesting that we live in a time where the ghostly has become more substantial than the material. This transformation is evident in the spectral nature of finance capital and the virtual public spheres created by digital technologies. Szeman notes that physical boundaries have been superseded, leading to new metaphors of social and cultural diffusion, where the ghostly and indeterminate have become central to understanding our present reality, (Szeman, 2000, p.104).

Conclusion

Thus, Szeman's (2000) discussion of the spectral nature of contemporary society resonates with Chendan and Belayong’s narratives on the Iban’s trophy heads’ practices, where the ghostly presence of trophy heads has a tangible impact on the community. The Iban's meticulous attention to these heads and the performance of *miring* rituals can be seen as a form of engagement with the spectral, ensuring that the spirits of the past remain acknowledged and honoured.

Chapter summary

This chapter embarks on an exploration of mediators that facilitate spectral communications within the *miring* ritual and Iban way of life. Through the lenses of ritual specialists, *sampi*, and trophy heads, the chapter uncovers the significance that underpin these interactions between the living and the spirit world.

I began the analysis by examining into the pivotal role played by ritual specialists such as *lemambang* and *manang* in mediating spectral communication. Through their expertise, ritual specialists mediate divine messages, offer guidance, and facilitate healing for those seeking connection with the spirit world. Central to the chapter’s exploration is the transformative power of *sampi* invoking and sustaining spectral communication. Across diverse cultural traditions, *sampi* serve as medium for altering consciousness, invoking spiritual energies, and establishing sacred space.

The chapter further examines the significance of trophy heads as mediators of spectral communications within the Iban community. Revered as vessels containing the essence of the deceased, trophy heads serve as potent conduits for ancestral spirits, offering insights into the mysteries of communication between the living and the spectral. This study demonstrates that there are layers of complexities within Deumert's (2018, 2022) perspectives of the sociolinguistics of the spectres and the Ibans of Sarawak.

In the next chapter, I will present the overall summary of my analysis and findings within Deumert's (2018, 2022) perspective and the other scholarly references that have been referred to previously.

Chapter Eight: Sociolinguistics of the Spectres

"My main role is to uphold the old practices. That is also my belief. There are so many beliefs in the new world and mine are the old Iban beliefs. Many people are confused about the Iban culture and religion. For me, the Iban culture and religion are not the same."
Belayong

Introduction

In this chapter, I will summarise the thesis's critical findings about the two research questions. Furthermore, I will consider the study's implications for future research in the social sciences and propose that the thesis makes an original contribution in acknowledging the validity of narratives that stand at the threshold of the supernatural world.

8.1. Perspectives of the Ibans of Sarawak

In this study, I investigated the following questions:

1. How do Ibans describe their *miring* practices?
2. How do Ibans say they communicate with spirits, gods, and ancestors?

How do Ibans describe their miring practices?

This question examines Iban people's descriptions of their *miring* practices. The nine Iban people I interviewed described their *miring* practices as deeply intertwined with their spiritual beliefs and everyday lives. They said *miring* practices enable them to communicate with and appease the spiritual realm. These rituals and ceremonies include rice planting, harvest festivals, welcoming guests, animal sightings, offering food to the gods, and examination of animal offal.

8.1.1. Rice planting

My research participants' narratives reflect a communication that is beyond humans in their rice planting activities. Deumert's (2022) sociolinguistics of the spectres provide a lens for

recognising spectral communication in the participants' conversation related to *miring* during rice planting, and my findings revealed that the Ibans connect with spirits to ensure a successful harvest.

Four of my participants, Tajek, Daud, Chendan and Belayong, focus attention on the importance of *miring* during rice planting, reflecting a form of communication beyond conventional human interactions. Their interview data provide rich evidence for the importance of *miring* for the Ibans. From her interview excerpt, Tajek's narrative shows how *miring* is an ancestral tradition that underpins various aspects of life, including agriculture and education. She mentions, "I had followed the belief of our ancestors and that is the *miring*. When we harvest, we do the *miring*... so that my children do not have to eat Siamese rice." Her narrative indicates that *miring* is perceived as necessary for rice planting (and agriculture) and future generations' well-being.

Likewise, Daud's reminiscence of his elders performing *miring* for important occasions in the longhouse, particularly rice planting, underscores the ritual's importance in ensuring healthy paddy harvests and the community's well-being. He says, "Our grandparents will have the *miring* for every important occasion. We must hold the *miring* to start the paddy planting season." Daud's account shows that *miring* is not only a ceremonial practise but a crucial component of the way of living, which is deeply embedded in the Iban culture and social organisation.

Chendan's account adds on the various contexts in which the *miring* is performed: seeking a bountiful harvest, offering *piring* to Sempulang Gana and seeking healing from any sickness. He stresses that *miring* is integral to the Iban way of living, reflecting their values and beliefs. Chendan's narrative highlights the multifaceted nature of *miring* reflecting their dual functionality in addressing the Iban community's spiritual and practical needs.

Another participant, Belayong, provides an essential perspective on the necessity of *miring* to appease land guardians. He contemplates that Christian prayer alone is not enough, emphasising that "many people just use their prayers, but it would not work... they will come back to the *miring*." His statement underscores the deep-rooted belief in the effectiveness of the *miring* and signifies the spiritual importance within the Iban community.

My interpretations of these narratives suggest that the *miring* rituals are central to the Iban's interaction with the spiritual realm, especially in rice planting. The *miring* serves as a form of

spectral communication, enabling the Iban to connect with spirits and seek their blessings for rice planting and other agricultural success. This connection is spiritual and ecological, reflecting the Iban's reverence for their natural environment.

These communications with spiritual entities during rice planting rituals enhance the prospects of a successful harvest and reinforce cultural values and social cohesion. As Freeman (2004) notes, the Iban way of life, heavily reliant on hill rice cultivation, integrates *miring* practices into their agricultural activities. The timing and reasons for *miring*, as described by Tajek and Daud, are closely associated with the rice planting season, a period of immense importance in the Iban calendar.

The sociolinguistics of the spectres is an analytical lens that helps us understand the Iban's *miring* rituals. These practices highlight how the Iban continuously communicate with the spiritual realm, ensuring their traditions remain meaningful. The *miring* associated with rice planting are not merely about providing a good harvest; they are a means of expressing and negotiating relationships within the Iban and with the environment and their spirit realm. This relationship between *miring* and spectral communication is essential for the Iban's well-being and continuity, demonstrating these practices' importance.

8.1.2. *Gawai Dayak* (Harvest festival)

The narratives from Radin, Chendan and Daud provide compelling evidence for the role of *miring* rituals during *gawai* in the Iban community. Their stories indicated that these rituals are essential for maintaining the community's way of life and spiritual well-being. As Freeman (1953), Kedit (1969), and Jensen (1974) have expressed, *Gawai* encompasses various themes, including agricultural, health and longevity and prosperity. I focus primarily on the *Gawai* Dayak, a revered harvest festival within the indigenous Dayak groups in Sarawak.

Radin's narrative stresses on the generational practices of the Iban, particularly during the *Gawai* festival. He recalls participating in every *miring* ceremony in the longhouse, underscoring how these practices are well established in Iban's social life. Radin's experiences demonstrate that the *miring* ritual is a tradition and a way to maintain social bonds and community cohesion. This orients with Deumert's (2022) assertion that sociolinguistics should account for social life's sensuous and affective nature, acknowledging the role of spectral entities in shaping human behaviour.

Likewise, Chendan's narrative underscores the indispensability of the *miring* ritual during *Gawai* celebrations. He describes the *miring* as a prelude to *Gawai,* tracing its continuity since 1965. Chendan highlights the invocation of gods and ancestors during *miring* as a crucial element, as a formal announcement of the *Gawai* celebrations and as an earnest appeal for divine assistance. This practice reflects the long-standing tradition of *miring* in preserving Iban social values and fostering community cohesion. As Chendan explains, "The *miring* is a necessary platform for offerings and invitations to the ancestors and gods, likening the gesture to inviting guests to one's home and offering them food." This demonstrates how the *miring* ritual reinforces the interconnectedness between the living and the spirit world, echoing Deumert's (2022) idea of listening to and making spectral entities visible.

Daud's narrative highlights the well-established tradition of *miring* within the Iban community, especially in relation to *Gawai* celebrations. He makes a point of *miring* is foundational to everything the Ibans do, reflecting its enduring importance in shaping Iban identity and values. Daud's mention of the Malaysian government declaring a public holiday for *Gawai* illustrates official recognition and support for cultural traditions, promoting a shared national identity. He notes that *Gawai* celebrations offer an opportunity for the Dayak community to showcase their culture, drawing attention to the objective not solely to display Iban culture but to underscore the significance of *miring*. Daud's clarification that *Gawai* is not primarily about alcohol consumption but rather about *miring* reinforces the central role of this ritual in the festival. This supports Deumert's (2022) exploration of the persistence of cultural elements in post-colonial contexts, highlighting how *miring* continues to be integral to Iban social and cultural life.

My interpretations of these narratives suggest that the *miring* rituals are central to the Iban's interaction with the spiritual realm, especially during *Gawai Dayak.* The *miring* serves as a form of spectral communication, enabling the Iban to connect with spirits and seek their blessings for bountiful harvests. This connection is spiritual and ecological, reflecting the Iban's reverence for the environment.

The narratives of Radin, Chendan, and Daud reveal how the *miring* ritual is a form of spectral communication that manifests the Iban's strong relationship with their spirit world. The *miring* facilitates a communication between the living and the spirits, ensuring the Iban's well-being and the success of their harvests. This resonates with Deumert's (2022) research that sociolinguistics should encompass the interactions between humans and spectral entities, recognising the significance of these practices in shaping social realities.

This study adopts a 'spectral' view, offering a calibrating perspective on the sociolinguistics on the *miring*. The *Gawai* festival involves invoking gods, honouring ancestors, and maintaining a continuous communication with the spirit world. This interaction goes beyond conventional sociolinguistic research, challenging us to consider how communication with spectral entities shapes cultural practices.

8.1.3. Welcoming guests in the context of weddings

A few of my participants mention the great significance of *miring* rituals while welcoming guests, especially in weddings within the Iban community. The participants in the study indicate that the *miring* is important to establish communication with their gods and ancestors in welcoming guests -and the guests include the gods and spirits themselves-. This integration of visible and invisible realms through *miring* brings out the interconnectedness inherent in Iban culture.

For instance, Daud points out the importance of *miring* in maintaining hospitality. He states, "I am very well versed with *miring* practices. Either I am a guest or a host, *miring* is a must to show hospitality. That is the way for our longhouses in Saratok. When we run campaigns for our political parties during elections, the longhouse people know that I am a *lemambang*, and they will ask me to perform the *miring*. They were always ready with the *miring* offerings, and they would let me perform the invocations of the gods." His narrative gives emphasis on how *miring* is not only a tradition but also a way to reinforce social ties through spectral practices rooted in daily life.

Lindong's narrative further supports the importance of *miring* in fostering hospitality and communal values. He describes participating in *miring* rituals for various events such as weddings, welcoming guests, and house blessings. Lindong explains, "Before I was a Catholic, in my younger days, I joined *miring* for weddings, to welcome guests, and for house blessings. This was to ensure that any bad spirits or omens were addressed and to honour the important guests." His narrative orients with Deumert's (2022) notion that social life is deeply affective and integrated, with rituals like *miring* facilitating these connections and maintaining community harmony.

Chendan adds a layer of understanding by explaining how *miring* serves a protective function. He advocates, "For weddings, we must welcome the guests. If an Iban wants to welcome his bride, the *miring* must be performed on the ground to get rid of bad spirits. Just in case the

bride carries a bad omen into her new longhouse. The *miring* helps to ground the evil spirit, preventing it from entering the longhouse." His statements point out that the *miring*'s role in safeguarding against evil forces, mirroring the Iban belief in the existence of spirits in everyday life.

Radin's narrative draws attention to the importance of *miring* during weddings. He notes, "In the past, if anyone gets married, the Iban way to arrange a marriage is according to the ways and customs of the Ibans. Therefore, the *miring* practice cannot be avoided." This testimony supports the idea that *miring* is integral to keeping the Iban traditions.

My interpretations suggest that *miring* rituals during weddings are a form of spectral for spectral communication within the Iban community. These rituals serve as a medium for interacting with the spiritual realm, seeking blessings and protection for the couple, and reinforcing social and cultural continuity. This supports Deumert's (2022) argument that sociolinguistics should include interactions between humans and spectral entities, acknowledging the importance of these practices in shaping social realities.

Integrating the concept of spectral communication into the analysis provides a transformative perspective. The presence of supernatural elements within *miring* rituals, such as invocations to gods and spirits, showcases how these communicative practices intersect with spiritual beliefs. This sociolinguistics of the spectre adds depth to understanding Iban rituals by acknowledging these supernatural elements, reinforcing the community's cultural values and social cohesion.

8.1.4. Animal signs and interpreting animal offal

I argue that the Ibans' interpretation of animal sightings and offal is an important form of communication with the supernatural. The sociolinguistics of the spectres helps illuminate how these practices are essential to the Iban's way of living and spiritual life, focussing attention on the interrelation between the living and invisible.

The Iban practice of interpreting animal sightings and reading animal offal during rituals is a vital form of spectral communication. These rituals provide spiritual guidance and maintain harmony within the Ibans, showcasing the practical implications of spectral thinking.

Firstly, Belayong's account illustrates the significance of animal sightings as omens necessitating ritualistic responses. His narrative focuses on the firm belief in the power of omens and the necessity of performing *miring* to appease spirits. The Ibans seek to maintain harmony and prevent adverse outcomes by abiding by these rituals.

Another participant, Tajek explains the significance of animal sightings as omens related to rice planting practices. She also mentions interpreting the pig liver to assess whether the gods are pleased, highlighting the importance of divination for the Ibans. This practice reflects a form of spectral thinking where natural phenomena are interpreted as messages from the spirit world. By integrating these rituals, the Ibans protect their crops and livelihoods, demonstrating the practical implications of spectral communication.

Lambat's experience as a healer and interpreter of signs further reinforces the significance of spectral communication. He explains, "I know how to read signs. For instance, if an animal crosses in front of me, and I receive dreams." Lambat's ability to read signs and perform *miring* points out the role of spectral communication in guiding his actions and decisions. His narrative highlights the social significance of these practices for the Ibans, reflecting the relationship between culture and spirituality.

In response to these narratives, Deumert (2022) posits that sociolinguistics should encompass interactions between humans and spectral entities, recognising the importance of these practices in shaping social realities. Hollan (2020) stresses that ghosts and spirits, though immaterial, have profound impacts on human behaviour and social structures. These perspectives resonate with the Iban practices of interpreting animal sightings and reading offal, which serve as vital mediums for spectral communication.

Sutlive (1978) describes rituals to ensure the success of a *Gawai*, displaying the importance of animal omens. He writes that guests are instructed to ignore unfavourable omens, such as sightings of birds or snakes, and that offerings are made to appease the associated, malevolent spirits. This ceremonial use of animal offal and using a chicken's blood to touch each person's forehead as part of the pre-*gawai* celebration, signifies protection and approval from their gods, spirits and ancestors.

Merging the narratives of Belayong, Tajek, and Lambat with the conceptual framework of spectral communication, the Iban practices of interpreting animal sightings and performing *miring* play a vital role in their way of living and spiritual life. These practices exemplify how

spectral thinking unsettles traditional notions of agency and emphasises the relationship between the human and spiritual realms.

8.1.5. *Piring* (Offering food to the gods)

The practice of *piring* for the Ibans resonates with Deumert's (2022) sociolinguistics of the spectres which emphasises the importance of including spectral entities in understanding social realities. Gertrud Huwelmeier (2021) proposes that the 'otherworld' becomes accessible and tangible through specific practices, such as cooking for spirits and presenting devotional food and objects. She notes that "food plays a critical role in manifesting otherworldly beings during rituals" and highlights how believers use food to communicate with their ancestors, deities, and other spiritual beings (Huwelmeier 2021, p. 108). This view reflects the Iban practice of *piring*, where food offerings serve as an avenue for spectral communication. The preparation and presentation of offerings reflect Iban's belief in maintaining a connection with their spirit world. The detailed process of preparing various types of rice, tobacco, betel nuts, and other ingredients, as described by Sutlive and Sutlive (2001), mirrors Huwelmeier's findings on the role of food in spiritual practices.

Chendan's narrative draws attention to the importance of *piring* for the Iban's *miring* rituals. He explains the preparation process, noting, "From the Saribas riverine, we have 21 different types of offerings." This list includes items such as betel nut, various types of rice, tobacco, and rice wine. Chendan stresses that if all 21 ingredients are present, the *piring* is considered complete. He explains the different types of offerings based on the ritual's significance, stating, "The amount of offerings in the individual abode is different from the offerings in the common gallery." This careful preparation demonstrates the Iban's reverence for their spiritual traditions. The practice of *piring* reflects Deumert's (2022) notion of listening to ghosts and making them visible in social research, as it demonstrates the active engagement with spectral entities through these rituals.

Daud highlights the necessity of complete *miring* offerings to appease the gods, spirits and ancestors. He mentions, "Everything was set with the *miring*. And the *miring* offerings must be complete. If the offering plate is not complete, and at the same time, the gods and ancestors were invoked to grace the events, they would be angered if insufficient foods were offered. And you don't want that to happen because bad things will happen to you instead." Daud's account supports Deumert's claim by illustrating how the Iban people engage with spectral

entities through *piring.* The completeness and correctness of offerings are crucial for maintaining harmony between the living and the spiritual realms, making the spectral entities visible and acknowledging their influence on social realities.

Chendan describes the different types of *piring* offerings based on the layout of the longhouse: Chendan's narrative affirms Sutlive and Sutlive's (2001) claims that offerings follow a specific sequence, beginning with items for chewing and smoking, followed by 'real food' – primarily rice – and concluding with optional extras. The careful preparation and presentation of offerings demonstrate the Iban's respect for their spiritual traditions and the importance of maintaining proper rituals to honour the gods, spirits and ancestors.

Lambat provides a narrative of preparing offerings for the gods. He explains, "The first set is prepared especially for Semerugah, the King of the soil. Ibans believe he is the god of the earth, especially in farming. The first ingredient for each tray is the betel nut." This specific preparation highlights the significance of *piring* in the Iban *miring* and their role in spectral communication. Deumert's (2022) notion of listening to ghosts is reflected in the rituals described by Lambat. Preparing for the gods signifies an active engagement with spectral entities, seeking their blessings and approval. This practice reinforces the interplay between the living and spirit world, stressing the influence of non-human voices and actions on human behaviour.

Belayong explains the specific requirements and variations of *piring* based on the type of ritual, such as *Gawai Sakit* (healing ritual). He stresses the importance of preparing these offerings correctly to appease the gods and ensure successful outcomes. Belayong's narrative highlights the importance of proper offerings in ensuring effective communication with the gods. This aligns with Deumert's (2022) and Sutlive and Sutlive's (2001) assertions about the importance of ritual offerings and spectral communication. By preparing and offering *piring*, the Ibans engage in a conversation with the spirits, seeking their approval and maintaining harmony. Belayong's narrative underscores the importance of specific offerings, such as using an Iban cockerel instead of a Chinese chicken, to properly communicate with the gods and warrant the success of the *miring*.

The analyses of Daud's, Chendan's, Lambat's, Belayong's, and Cherang's narratives contend that *piring* is a crucial practice for the Iban's *miring* tradition. Deumert's (2022) and Sutlive and Sutlive's (2001) studies provide a robust framework for understanding the significance of

these offerings. *Piring* serves as a medium for spectral communication, honouring and appeasing the spirits. This practice portrays how the Ibans maintain their *miring* tradition and navigate the complexities of their spiritual landscape, reinforcing the intricate interplay between human and non-human agency in shaping their social reality.

How do Ibans say they communicate with spirits, gods, and ancestors?

This question investigates Iban people's narratives about their communicative practices as they invoke spirits, gods and ancestors. These communicative practices include dreams, mediation of spiritual messages by ritual specialists, countering unruly spirits, conflict resolution through *kelam ai*, invocation of the spirit world through chants, and communication with the spirit world through appeasing trophy heads.

My participants shared various insights into these practices, emphasising the spiritual significance behind each experience. Their interviews' testimony points to the intricate sociolinguistics of spectral communication in Iban culture.

8.1.6. Dreams

My participants' narratives underscore dreams' significant role in the Iban worldview, confirming earlier findings that dreams are revered as a crucial medium for interaction with deities and spirits (Sutlive and Sutlive, 2001). Their narratives suggest that dreams are a pivotal component of their communicative practices, serving as important channels for spectral communication.

The Ibans consider dreams and omens as important medium for communication with their gods, spirits and ancestors. These spectral communications guide their actions and decisions, ensuring harmony and seeking spiritual guidance in everyday life (Sutlive and Sutlive, 2001). I'Anson & Jasper (2017, p.20) discuss how dreams are understood differently in various cultural contexts. They highlight that in many non-Western traditions, including Islamic ones, dreams are taken seriously and considered significant sources of guidance and prophecy. This contrasts with Western perspectives, where dreams are often considered ambivalent and individual experiences. For the Ibans, dreams are more than visual experiences in a state of sleep; they are the principal mediums through which the dead communicate with the living

(Sutlive, 1991, p. 9). The narratives from Radin, Belayong, Lambat, and Cherang provide examples of how dreams influence the Iban way of living.

Radin's account validates the assumption that dreams serve as a crucial medium for communication with the spiritual realm, guiding the actions and decisions of individuals within the community. Radin's description of his dreams provides concrete evidence supporting the theoretical claim. He explains how *miring* ceremonies are performed in response to dreams and omens, highlighting the role of spectral communication in the Iban way of living. He notes that spirits visit through dreams, and the Ibans perform *miring* to either sustain a good omen or counteract an unfavourable one. This practice underscores the belief that spectral entities actively influence the living, and rituals are necessary to maintain harmony and avoid potential misfortune. Radin's narrative also challenges the boundaries and binaries typical of modernist thought. He explains that if the omen from a dream is good, a *miring* ceremony is performed to ensure it stays; if the omen is unfavourable, a *miring* is conducted to avoid negative consequences and seek forgiveness. This fluid approach to dealing with omens and dreams highlights a flexible, context-dependent understanding of agency and causality, which contrasts sharply with modernity's fixed, binary thinking characteristic.

Deumert (2022) posits that the sociolinguistics of the spectre are grounded in radical empiricism, acknowledging the sensuous and affective nature of social life. This framework resists the "boundaries, binaries and demarcations" embedded in the linear temporality of modernity (Garuba, 2013 in Deumert, 2022, p.2). Radin's narrative about his dreams and the associated *miring* ceremonies clearly illuminates this theoretical claim, demonstrating how the Iban's engagement with spectral communication transcends conventional temporal and spatial boundaries.

Additionally, Belayong's narrative provides evidence supporting Deumert's (2022) research about spectral thinking and communication. He recounts how his dreams, which he perceived as visits from his deceased grandfather, led him to perform *miring* rituals and eventually embrace his role as a *manang*. Belayong's narrative illustrates how his dreams, influenced by spectral entities, guided his actions and decisions. His grandfather's request in the dream and the subsequent illness he experienced upon refusal indicate that his agency was influenced by spectral forces.

Furthermore, Sutlive (1991) and Sutlive & Sutlive (2001) highlight the importance of dreams in Iban culture as reliable mediums for communication with the spiritual realm. Belayong's experience echoes this, as he describes how his grandfather's spectral presence in his dreams conveyed messages and requests. "The spirits will visit through dreams, and when we have dreams, when we receive omens, we perform the *miring*," he explains. This underscores the role of dreams in maintaining a connection with the spirit world and enabling spectral communication.

Deumert's (2022) perspectives on spectral thinking focuses on past, present, and future interrelations. Belayong's narrative shows how his grandfather's spectral presence influences his life decisions and spiritual practices. This interrelation is further explained when he states, "The feeling was very real, as if I was meeting him face to face." This sense of direct interaction with the past through spectral communication supports the notion of temporal interconnectedness.

Another participant, Lambat's account, aligns with Deumert's (2022) spectral advocacy. He became a *lemambang* after having a significant dream at 18. This illustrates how dreams serve as a medium for spectral communication, influencing social roles and responsibilities. Lambat's narrative emphasises the role of dreams in validating and guiding significant life choices and societal roles within the Iban community. Lambat's statement that he became a *lemambang* before his father and uncles further hints at his community's complex hierarchy and dynamics. He states, "I was a *lemambang* before my father and uncles." The account of his dream and his role as a *lemambang* exemplifies the interconnectedness of dreams and ancestral beliefs. Lambat's narrative suggests that dreams serve as a means of communication with the spirit realm, and ritual specialists like Lambat are important persons to continue sharing his expertise and knowledge to the next generations of Ibans.

Cherang's narration demonstrates how dreams are integral to decision-making processes and interpreting events within the Iban community. Cherang's account is evidence of how dreams guide the actions and decisions of individuals within the community.

By integrating these theoretical claims with the narratives of Radin, Belayong, Lambat, and Cherang and drawing on comparative perspectives from I'Anson & Jasper (2017), I argue that dreams are essential mediums for spectral communication in Iban culture. The data supports the claim that dreams guide individual and communal actions, bridging the human and spirit

world. This analysis underscores the importance of spectral thinking in understanding Iban's beliefs, highlighting the intricate interplay between human and non-human agency in shaping their social reality.

8.1.7. Mediation of spiritual messages by ritual specialists -the *lemambang*

In an Iban longhouse, the *lemambang* is the most important person to perform *miring* for significant rituals. The *lemambang* perform priestly roles, leading public invocations.

My study participants shared narratives about their roles and capacity as a *lemambang*. The narratives from Daud, Cherang, Chendan, Lambat, and Belayong provide concrete examples of how these ritual specialists maintain and transmit cultural and spiritual knowledge.

The integration of traditional practices with modern settings, as seen in Belayong's officiation of Iban weddings in hotels, reflects the dynamic nature of sociolinguistics within the Iban community. This continuity and adaptation of cultural practices underscore the importance of spectral communication and the preservation of cultural traditions.

Daud's experience highlights the importance of learning and inheriting knowledge from elders. Initially knowing only basic chants, Daud's journey involved observing and participating in *miring* ceremonies across different longhouses. His narrative underscores the role of Iban leaders and elders in ensuring the continuity of these rituals. Despite converting to Christianity, which forbids such practices, Daud said he continued to perform *miring*, reflecting the well-established nature of these traditions. This continuity of practice, despite religious conversion, exemplifies the complex interplay between traditional beliefs and external influences. Moreover, Daud's role in performing the *miring* during political campaigns and significant community events demonstrates how these rituals are intertwined with broader social and political life, reflecting the integration of spectral communication into sociolinguistic traditions.

In the same manner, Cherang's journey underscores the gradual transition from observer to performer. Although he initially was an observer, his role as a penghulu (community leader) eventually required him to perform *miring* ceremonies. This transition highlights the process of knowledge transmission and the responsibilities that come with leadership roles. Cherang's experience demonstrates the Iban community's strong stance on passing down cultural and spiritual knowledge, ensuring the continuation of these practices.

In contrast, Chendan's narrative showcases his confidence and active role in performing rituals. He states, "I can call myself a *lemambang*, yes. I said so because I am a person of reference, and I am always invited to perform the *miring* whenever there is a *Gawai antu* (Significant ritual for the dead)."

Chendan's self-identification as a *lemambang* and his active participation in rituals portrays the recognition and respect he has earned within the Iban community. His ability to perform and lead *miring* ceremonies in multiple longhouses displays his expertise and the significance of his role in maintaining these traditions. The consistent invitations to perform rituals indicate his esteemed position and the importance of his contributions to the community's spiritual life.

Lambat's narrative reveals the unique challenges and recognition of being a *lemambang*. He mentions having a practice licence from the Sarawak government, indicating formal recognition of his role. His experiences performing rituals in public settings like the Kuching stadium highlight the relevance and adaptation of these traditions in contemporary settings. Lambat's role in spectral communication and cultural preservation is important despite the challenges, reflecting the dynamic interplay between traditional practices and modern recognition.

Belayong's curiosity and eagerness to learn from his grandfather showcases the significance of early engagement and mentorship in preserving the *miring* tradition. His transition from an observer to an active participant and eventually a *lemambang* highlights the process of knowledge transmission and the role of younger generations in sustaining these practices. The support and guidance from his grandfather and other elders ensured that he could carry forward the tradition.

Therefore, based on the narratives of Daud, Cherang, Chendan, Lambat, and Belayong, the *lemambang* are essential mediators of spectral communication in the Iban community. The data supports the claim that these ritual specialists guide individual and communal actions, bridging the human and spirit worlds. This analysis underscores the importance of spectral thinking in understanding Iban's beliefs, highlighting the complex interplay between human and non-human agency in shaping their social reality.

8.1.8. Countering Unruly Spirits

The participants' narratives suggest that countering unruly spirits through *miring* rituals illustrates the sociolinguistics of spectral communication within the Iban community. In Iban cosmology, maintaining balance and harmony between the visible and invisible realms is crucial for societal well-being and individual prosperity. Unruly spirits challenge this balance by their disruptive nature and can cause chaos, illness, or misfortune in the human world. When encountering these spirits, the Ibans turn to more to communicate and negotiate with the spiritual realm. These rituals aim to appease the restless spirits, restore harmony, and mitigate any negative impacts on human life.

Sather (2001) notes the existence of entities beyond humans within Iban cosmology, particularly those believed to coexist in the human world and share the domain of the living. The actions of these entities are considered to impact human health and overall well-being, with severe illnesses often attributed to the influence of *antu*. While diet, labour, and living conditions can contribute to poor health, spirits are commonly perceived as significant causal agents (Sather 2012, pp. 65–66). The Ibans refer to the departed as *antu*, including malevolent spirits or *antu sebayan* (Wadley 1999, p. 599).

For example, my participant Daud referred to Covid-19 as one of the unruly spirits affecting the Iban way of living. He described how his longhouse organised a *miring* ceremony to protect against the pandemic. Daud shared:

"When the world fell sick recently, our longhouse needed to take immediate action to ward off evil spirits. We needed to keep the evil at the longhouse's steps and not let it proceed to enter. Therefore, a *miring* ceremony was organised at the front steps of the longhouse to prevent Covid-19 from entering the longhouse. That is how we protect our longhouse."

Daud's narrative highlights the Iban belief in spectral communication to ward off evil spirits or opposing forces threatening the community's well-being. The *miring* ceremony serves as a protective ritual to maintain the longhouse's safety and sanctity, showcasing the community's reliance on spiritual practices for defence against external threats. This decision to conduct a *miring* ceremony demonstrates the belief in the interconnectedness of physical and spiritual realms within Iban cosmology.

Daud's account further illustrates the adaptive nature of Iban culture in response to contemporary challenges. Despite the modern context of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Ibans draw on traditional *miring* ceremonies to address present-day threats. This continuity of cultural traditions reflects the enduring significance of spectral communication and spectral thinking in shaping the collective identity and resilience of the Iban community. Integrating Deumert's (2022) sociolinguistics of the spectres enriches the analysis by emphasising the spiritual dimensions of these rituals, highlighting their adaptability to modern challenges, and underscoring their crucial role in maintaining cultural identity and community cohesion.

8.1.9. Conflict resolution through *kelam ai*

The *kelam ai*, a traditional Iban trial by water, serves as an example of spectral communication and its significance in conflict resolution within the Iban community. This ritual, though now banned, remains a vital part of the Iban cultural memory and practice. The narratives provided by one participant, Cherang, offer detailed insights into the *kelam ai*, focussing on its careful preparation, communal involvement, and spiritual significance. His account illustrates how the Iban engage with the spiritual realm to resolve disputes and maintain social harmony.

According to Cherang the *kelam ai* ritual involves not only the disputing parties but also the broader community, reflecting its communal and spiritual nature. The participants and community members engage in various activities, including the recitation of chants and the sounding of drums and gongs, creating an atmosphere that blends the spiritual and social aspects of Iban life. Before the actual *kelam ai*, the champions undergo a night of preparation, including sleeping within a square area gated with traditional woven clothes. The next morning, they are questioned about any dreams they had, which are interpreted as omens regarding the outcome of the trial. This practice highlights the importance of spectral communication, as dreams are considered messages from the spiritual realm guiding the trial's outcome.

The *kelam ai* itself involves the champions diving into the water, with their performance determining the dispute's outcome. The community closely observes the proceedings, including the behaviour of the smoke from the cooking fire and the actions of the champions underwater. This element of the ritual points out the tangible interaction with the spectral world, as the champions' fate is believed to be influenced by the spirits. This resonates with Deumert's (2022) study by making the spectral elements of Iban life visible. The detailed preparation of *piring*,

the interpretation of dreams, and the communal engagement all reflect the sensuous and affective nature of social life that Deumert (2022) describes, (p.2).

Sather (2001) mentions the existence of entities beyond humans within Iban cosmology, particularly those believed to coexist in the human world and share the domain of the living. The actions of these entities are believed to impact human health and overall well-being, with severe illnesses often attributed to the influence of *antu* (spirits). This understanding aligns with Cherang's account, where the *kelam ai* ritual involves intricate interactions with spiritual forces, underscoring the Iban belief in the agency of spirits in guiding human affairs.

Cherang's account of the *kelam ai* ritual provides a compelling illustration of how spectral elements are ingrained into the Iban community's conflict resolution practices. His narrative highlights the reliance on spiritual and spectral communication in resolving disputes when traditional leadership is perceived as ineffective. He describes how, in the absence of effective leadership, the community would often resort to *kelam ai* to settle disputes. This immediate recourse to *kelam ai* showcases the community's trust in spiritual intervention over human mediation.

Kelam ai ritual illustrates how the Iban community incorporates spectral thinking into their conflict resolution practices. By relying on spiritual guidance rather than human mediation, the community challenges conventional notions of agency and highlights the interconnectedness of human and non-human influences. This aligns with Deumert's (2022) call to listen to and seek out ghosts, integrating their presence into our understanding of social practices.

The *kelam ai*, despite being a banned ritual, contributes significantly to the sociolinguistics of the spectres. The ban itself reflects external pressures and changing legal landscapes, yet the persistence of these practices in the collective memory highlights their important cultural and spiritual resonance. The prohibition adds a layer of resistance and resilience to the ritual, underscoring the community's commitment to their spiritual beliefs and practices. This enduring practice, even under prohibition, exemplifies the idea that spectral communication remains a vital aspect of Iban social reality, challenging and transcending imposed boundaries and legal restrictions.

The analysis of Cherang's narrative about the *kelam ai* ritual reveals the complex relationship between spiritual beliefs, offerings, and conflict resolution in the Iban way of living. By integrating insights from Deumert (2022) and empirical data from Cherang's account, the *kelam*

ai ritual exemplifies the sociolinguistics of the spectres and the importance of spectral communication. This analysis underscores the need to include spectral elements in sociolinguistic research to fully grasp the cultural practices of the Iban community, highlighting the relevance of studying traditional rituals like *kelam ai* despite their contemporary prohibition.

8.1.10. Invocation of the spirit world through *sampi*

The narratives from my participants reveal that the sampi is an integral part of Iban spiritual beliefs. *Sampi* is believed to have the power to connect the human world with the spirit world and facilitate communication with the supernatural realm. Deumert's (2022) call to embrace the spectral and the affective responses amplified through sound directly parallels the Iban's use of *sampi*. These soundscapes create a tangible bridge between the physical and spiritual realms, allowing the Iban community to communicate with their ancestors and seek their protection and guidance. This *sampi* also shows the attitude of respect and deference the Ibans bestow towards their spirits (Freeman 1955, p. 155).

However, instead of showing such attitudes and deference while requesting favours, Cherang's *sampi* for *kelam ai* seeks help from the spirits to curse and punish any wrongdoing that caused the dispute. His *sampi* commands them to take specific actions to resolve disputes. Cherang's *sampi* clearly states the nature of the dispute, involving land, and serves as the central issue around which the chant revolves. This *sampi* is described as 'dark' by Cherang himself because it seeks punishment and includes curses directed at those perceived as unjust. Phrases like "Let them lose, let them fall, strangle their life, let them die, let them feel discomfort" illustrate the severity of the curses, emphasising the quest for justice.

This curse serves as a form of retribution, calling upon the spirits to punish or harm those cheating the speakers. Cherang implies this was necessary to beget justice for the innocent party. The speakers beseech the spirits for support, help, and justice. They seek guidance and assistance in resolving their dispute, implying that the spirits have the power to influence the outcome. This resonates with Hollan (2020), who differentiates between real ghosts and secondary haunting. Real ghosts engage directly with the haunted, seeking immediate reparation, while secondary haunting involves mediating stories to arouse collective consciousness and mobilise societal changes. This distinction highlights the immediate impact of spectral presences versus broader efforts to address historical injustices (Hollan, 2020, p.

454). Thus, Hollan's differentiation resonates with the Iban's immediate engagement with spectral presences through rituals like *kelam ai*. These rituals seek direct reparation and justice, reflecting the personal and immediate nature of real ghosts' demands.

Lambat's *sampi* mentions bringing offerings "for times of offerings" and lists the names of individuals, probably ancestors or spirits. These offerings and rituals underline the importance of reciprocity with the spirit world. The *sampi* also calls upon natural elements and deities, such as Semerugah and Sempulang Gana, who are associated with the land and rice spirits. This aligns with the Iban cultural belief in the connection between agriculture and the spirit world.

Lambat's recitations emphasise reciprocity between the human and spirit worlds. The offerings and rituals are performed with the expectation of receiving blessings, such as a bountiful harvest. His *sampi* describes the transformation of Lilut (my Iban name), into a significant figure who can influence the land, water, and sky. This empowerment through ritual action is a common theme in contexts involving spirit communication.

Lambat's *sampi* is an expression of Iban culture, where language is intertwined with ritual, spirituality, and agricultural practices. It demonstrates how language is used to establish connections, seek blessings, and convey cultural values. It also reflects a worldview where spectral communication plays a vital role in maintaining harmony with the spirit world, ensuring agricultural success, and reinforcing cultural identity.

The *sampi* among the Iban serve as a profound example of the sociolinguistics of the spectres. These chants exemplify how the Iban engage with the spectral realm to address contemporary issues, maintain cultural continuity, and reinforce social cohesion. The theoretical frameworks provided by Deumert (2022), and Hollan (2020) underscore the significance of these practices, validating the claims that spectral communication is integral to understanding the Iban's social realities.

8.1.11. Communication with the spirit world through appeasing trophy heads

My participants, Chendan and Belayong, shared their perspectives on trophy heads. Chendan, a community leader who practises both Christianity and the old religion, and Belayong, a practitioner of the old Iban religion, offer insights into the significance of trophy heads in the Iban cultural practices.

Chendan, a community leader who practises both Christianity and the old religion, describes the trophy heads as "treasures" within the longhouse community, indicating their symbolic and spiritual importance. He emphasises the necessity of performing *miring* rituals for these heads, particularly during *Gawai*, to honour and appease the spirits. This practice reflects a belief in the active presence and influence of ancestral spirits associated with the trophy heads. Chendan states, "Our longhouse still keeps all of our ancestors' 'treasures'. The heads never requested food, but food offerings must be given to them during *Gawai*." This highlights the ongoing relationship with these spirits, where offerings are made to maintain harmony and honour the ancestors.

Likewise, Belayong discusses the severe consequences of neglecting *miring* rituals for the removal of trophy heads, suggesting that failure to perform these rituals can result in mental illness or death. He explains, "Many people become insane, sick if they avoid the *miring* for the removal of trophy heads. Death would not come immediately; instead, the person would fall sick every month." This reflects a belief in the spectral influence of ancestral spirits and the necessity of ritual practices to maintain good health, spiritual and social harmony.

Chendan's account underscores the importance of trophy heads as symbols of spiritual power and cultural heritage. Sutlive (1978) notes that after a skull had been cleaned, it was hung in a wicker casing in a prominent place on the verandah of the head-taker's family, as testimony to the courage of the hunter and in honour of the spirit of the skull. Neglect of it would result in some community calamity; to avoid such misfortune, fires were lit on ceremonial occasions beneath the skull, and it was fed rice (Sutlive, 1978, p. 30). This historical context is supported by Chendan, who emphasises the importance of performing *miring* rituals for the trophy heads, especially during *Gawai*.

According to Gordon, these spectres are not simply invisible or unknowable entities; rather, they have a real presence that demands attention. Haunting is a manifestation of unresolved social violence and loss, making it a domain of turmoil that calls for action (Gordon, 2011, p. 2). This concept of haunting and the persistent presence of spectres is vividly illustrated in the Iban tradition of preserving and venerating trophy heads, as described by Chendan. The historical practice, as supported by contemporary accounts, underscores the importance of performing *miring* rituals for appeasing these trophy heads, particularly during significant events like *Gawai*.

The practice of preserving and venerating trophy heads among the Ibans offers significant contributions to the fields of sociolinguistics of the spectres, spectral communication, and hauntology. The theoretical frameworks provided by Deumert (2022), Gordon (2011), and Hollan (2020) underscore the significance of these practices, validating the claims that spectral communication is integral to understanding the Iban's social realities.

The Iban tradition of performing *miring* rituals for trophy heads exemplifies spectral communication and can be understood through the lens of hauntology. These heads symbolise unresolved histories and the ongoing influence of the past on the present. The *miring* rituals performed for these heads are acts of engagement with these spectres, ensuring that the past remains a vital part of the present and future. This perspective highlights the persistence of cultural beliefs and practices and their role in shaping the Iban community's identity.

8.1.12. The Iban spiritual pantheon

My participants, Chendan, Tajek, Lambat and Radin advocate that the Iban spiritual pantheon is a fundamental aspect of their belief system, consisting of various spirits, deities, and entities that play significant roles in their cosmology and daily lives. This practice aligns with Deumert's (2022) concept of the sociolinguistics of the spectres, which emphasises the importance of understanding how spectral entities influence social realities.

Firstly, Chendan elaborates that King Sempulang Gana, the harvest god, introduced the *miring* ceremonies to the Ibans. Sempulang Gana, associated with soil and agriculture, holds a significant position in Iban worship, which involves sacrifices such as chickens or pigs. Chendan highlights that the *miring* ceremonies are essential for informing the gods and ancestors about festivals, seeking their assistance, and expressing gratitude. These offerings symbolise hospitality and respect, reflecting the Iban's understanding of reciprocity in spectral communication. He parallels inviting guests into one's home and summoning spiritual entities through *miring*, underscoring the cultural norms of respect and reciprocity. This practice demonstrates how the Iban actively engage with spectral entities, making them visible in their social and cultural practices (Deumert, 2022, p. 2).

Additionally, Tajek points out the importance of *miring* rituals to seek blessings from Sempulang Gana for a successful harvest and protection in the paddy fields. These offerings and invocations establish a connection with Sempulang Gana and seek divine intervention and blessings. Her belief in Sempulang Gana as a god illustrates the spiritual identity of the Iban

community. Tajek's narrative demonstrates the performative aspect of these rituals, highlighting how communication is central to enacting *miring* traditions. This resonates with Gordon's (2011) concept of haunting, which emphasises the need to address unresolved issues from the past to understand their impact on the present and future (Gordon, 2011, p. 5).

Lambat provides a detailed account of the hierarchical structure of the Iban gods, emphasising their divine governance over various aspects of life. Lambat explains, "The first set [*piring]* is prepared especially for Semerugah the King of the soil. The Iban believes that he is the god of the earth, especially in terms of farming." Lambat's narrative reflects the intergenerational transmission of knowledge and rituals related to spectral communication, showcasing the enduring relevance of ancestral beliefs in contemporary Iban society. His explanation of the Iban spiritual pantheon reflects a deep sense of cultural identity and heritage, reinforcing the cultural significance of these beliefs within the Iban community. This underscores Hollan's (2020) assertion that ghosts, and other spiritual beings significantly impact the human world, shaping social and cultural practices (Hollan, 2020, p. 454).

Radin explains that the Iban gods have been central to their way of life since ancient times. He emphasises that the relationship between gods and worshippers is personal, with Ibans making offerings to the gods that resonate most with their experiences. Radin elucidates, "For example, if you want good fortune, your *miring* should address Singalang Burung asking him for help and more blessings, especially during significant festivals. If you are in agriculture, your *miring* and incantations should invoke the god of agriculture, Sempulang Gana." This demonstrates the nuanced nature of Iban spirituality and how communication with the spiritual realm is tailored to meet different needs. Radin's narrative highlights how spectral communication is a central aspect of Iban's interaction with their spiritual pantheon, involving rituals, chants, and practices to establish a connection with the divine.

The Iban spiritual pantheon is important to their belief system, and their communication with these gods holds significant sociolinguistic implications. The *miring* tradition, closely linked with rice planting and agricultural practices, exemplifies how spectral communication reinforces cultural values and community cohesion among the Iban. The sociolinguistics of the spectre framework enriches our understanding of these dynamics, shedding light on the profound influence of spectral beliefs on language, culture, and social organisation within the Iban community. By analysing the narratives of my participants, Iban's practices of spectral

communication through their spiritual pantheon play a crucial role in preserving their cultural identity and ensuring the continuity of their traditions.

8.1.13 The Iban longhouse

My participants, Cherang and Gundi, provided narratives about the Iban longhouse and its association with sociolinguistics of the spectres.

Cherang's narrative captures the cultural significance of the *taba* ritual within the Iban community. This ritual is portrayed as a fundamental step in the longhouse-building process, reflecting the community's belief in the need to seek permission from the spirits of the soil. The offerings made during the *taba* ritual represent a symbolic communication with the spirits. This ritual demonstrates the interplay between language, action, and belief. It aligns with Deumert's (2022, p. 2) concept of the sociolinguistics of the spectres, where language is a means of communication among humans and a conduit for connecting with the spiritual realm.

The *taba* ritual highlights the communal nature of decision-making regarding longhouse construction. After the *taba* offerings are accepted, the community gathers to discuss and decide how many individuals or families will join in constructing the longhouse. This showcases how sociolinguistic practices facilitate communal decisions and cooperation. According to Sutlive and Sutlive (2001), such practices are deeply embedded in the Iban's social fabric, illustrating the importance of collective action and shared cultural values.

Additionally, Gundi's narrative underscores that from a young age, Ibans are taught that any significant activity – whether farming or another endeavour – must begin with a *miring* ceremony. This evidence the fundamental role of *miring* in the Iban way of life and its relevance to initiating various life events. Gundi explains, "We begin everything important with a *miring* ceremony, much like how others might start with a prayer." This comparison highlights the *miring* rituals as a form of communication with the spiritual realm akin to prayers.

Gundi's mention of 'responsibility' in the context of *miring* rituals highlights the communal nature of these practices. In the longhouse, individuals come together to perform *miring* ceremonies, emphasising the shared responsibility and cooperation required for such rituals. This fosters a sense of unity and shared identity within the longhouse community. Gundi's reference to 'offerings' reflects *miring* rituals' material and symbolic aspects. Offerings are

essential to these ceremonies, symbolising the community's respect and reverence for the spiritual entities and signifying the continuity of cultural traditions and beliefs passed down through generations.

In summary, the narratives of Cherang and Gundi illuminate the cultural and sociolinguistic dimensions of the *taba* ritual and *miring* ceremonies within the Iban longhouse. The concept of spectral communication enriches this analysis by emphasising the spiritual dimensions of these rituals. It highlights the ritual aspects of communication with the spirits and underscores the role of ritual practices in preserving cultural traditions and facilitating communal decision-making in the longhouse. The Iban longhouse serves as a central space where these spectral communications occur, reinforcing cultural values and community cohesion among the Iban. Through these detailed practices and beliefs, the Iban maintain a profound connection with their ancestral spirits, gods, and the natural world, as supported by the frameworks provided by Deumert (2022) and Sutlive and Sutlive (2001).

8.2. Sociolinguistics of the Spectres

Analysis of nine Iban people's narratives and descriptions of *miring* practices enables us to see clearly that spectral communication is a fundamental and vital aspect of everyday life for them. The interviews reveal a deeply rooted belief system where spirits, dreams, gods, and ancestors play a significant role in the daily lives of the Iban community. These beliefs are not merely remnants of folklore but are actively integrated into their cultural practices and rituals, demonstrating the Iban's firm conviction in the existence and influence of the supernatural.

Firstly, the participants consistently emphasised the importance of communicating with these supernatural entities through various rituals, most notably the *miring* ceremonies. These ceremonies serve multiple purposes, including seeking blessings, protection, and guidance from the spiritual realm. For instance, Chendan's detailed description of the 21 *piring* offerings underscores the meticulous nature of these rituals and their symbolic significance. He notes that each offering must be precise and complete, reflecting a deep respect for tradition and the belief that improper rituals could lead to unfavourable outcomes.

Deumert (2022) emphasises the sociolinguistics of the spectres, advocating for the inclusion of spectral entities in research to challenge traditional exclusions. This framework posits that

spectral communication, such as the interactions facilitated by ritual specialists, is integral to understanding social realities. Deumert states, "The dead are not merely material remains but possess agency, continuing to shape the present and future" (Deumert, 2022, p. 7). This aligns with the narratives of my study participants, demonstrating the *lemambang*'s pivotal role in Iban cultural and spiritual practices. The integration of traditional practices with modern settings, as seen in Belayong's officiation of Iban weddings in hotels, reflects the dynamic nature of sociolinguistics within the Iban community. This continuity and adaptation of cultural practices underscores the importance of spectral communication and the preservation of cultural traditions.

In addition, Gordon (2008) echoes this sentiment, stating, "Because the past always haunts the present, sociology must imaginatively engage those apparitions, those ghosts that tie present subjects to past histories" (Gordon, 2008, p. viii). Gordon draws on Derridean ideas, particularly those related to spectrality, haunting, and the relations between the past and the present, to develop her sociological and critical framework. This study intends to illuminate how *miring* rituals impart a narrative that diverges from the assertion that ghosts are merely unresolved memories or collective traumas. Instead, participants shared stories of *miring* as part of growing up in the longhouse and as essential rituals for healing, planting, and harvests.

Additionally, Reed Wadley (1999) mentions that most Iban spiritual researchers characterise the term *betara* or *petara* (gods) as supernatural entities with kind intentions toward human beings. However, Wadley notes that Sather (1994) saw these *petara* as ancestors with cosmic attributes and opines that Sather's terms better capture the essence of a *petara*. The Ibans refer to the departed as *antu* (ghosts), a broad term that might also encompass evil spirits, or *antu sebayan* (ghosts of the otherworld). This perspective aligns with the Iban practice of *miring*, where ancestral spirits are engaged to address contemporary issues like health (such as Covid-19) and land disputes. By invoking these spirits, the Iban acknowledge the persistent influence of the past on the present, recognising that these spectral presences must be actively engaged with to maintain social and spiritual harmony.

Daud's narrative, for example, highlights the Iban belief in spectral communication as a means of warding off evil spirits or opposing forces that threaten the community's well-being. He described how his longhouse organised a *miring* ceremony to protect against the Covid-19 pandemic. Daud shared: "When the world fell sick recently, our longhouse needed to take immediate action to ward off evil spirits. We needed to keep the evil at the longhouse's steps

and not let it proceed to enter. Therefore, a *miring* ceremony was organised at the front steps of the longhouse to prevent Covid-19 from entering the longhouse. That is how we protect our longhouse."

By integrating Deumert's (2022) sociolinguistics of the spectres with the study's interview data, the Iban's spiritual practices are integral to their social structures, reflecting a sophisticated interplay between the seen and unseen worlds. The Iban's engagement with their spectres ensures a balanced and harmonious present and future, honouring the past while maintaining social and spiritual continuity. This dynamic interaction with the spectral presence within their cultural practices illustrates the profound impact of these beliefs on the Iban's social and spiritual life, showcasing a community deeply connected to their ancestral traditions while navigating the complexities of contemporary existence.

In summary, the people I interviewed strongly believe in the validity and reality of the world of spirits, dreams, gods, and ancestors. Communication with these supernatural entities is a regular and essential practice, deeply embedded in their cultural and social fabric. By invoking theoretical work by Deumert, Davis, Gordon, and others, one can better understand and acknowledge the profound significance of these beliefs and practices in shaping the Iban community's way of life. The theoretical framework of spectral thinking and the empirical evidence from these narratives show that the *lemambang* play a crucial role in maintaining and transmitting the Iban's cultural and spiritual knowledge, reinforcing their interconnectedness with the spiritual world.

8.3 Implications of the study

By applying Deumert's (2022) sociolinguistics of the spectres to the study of Iban *miring* practices, this research makes significant contributions to the field of sociolinguistics. Rather than making definitive claims, this research offers a new perspective on how spectral elements—such as spirits and ancestors—intersect with communicative practices in social and ritual contexts. It demonstrates how spectral elements are not only present but actively shape social and ritual practices. This expands the theoretical understanding of how spiritual beliefs and practices intersect with language and social interactions. Future research can build on this framework to explore similar phenomena in other cultural contexts, further enriching the field of sociolinguistics.

The study also highlights the role of Iban rituals in maintaining social harmony and resolving conflicts, particularly through the mediation of ritual specialists. This has practical implications for conflict resolution strategies, suggesting that incorporating spiritual and cultural dimensions into conflict resolution practices can lead to more effective and sustainable outcomes. Although these findings are specific to the Iban community, they suggest that spiritual and cultural dimensions of ritual could have broader implications for conflict resolution practices in other communities.

The study addresses significant gaps in the literature regarding Iban spiritual practices and their sociolinguistic implications. While the research contributes to filling this gap, it should be viewed as an initial step towards a more comprehensive understanding of these practices. Future research can build on these findings to explore other aspects of Iban culture or to compare the Iban's practices with those of other indigenous groups, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of indigenous spiritual and cultural practices globally.

Reflecting on my own experience as an insider researcher, I found the process to be both deeply rewarding and challenging. My insider status allowed me to approach the research with a deep, lived understanding of the cultural and spiritual practices under investigation. My intimate knowledge and shared sense of trust with participants significantly enriched the research. This perspective allowed me to interpret the nuances of the Iban *miring* practices with a depth that might be different from an outsider's point of view. However, this positionality required constant navigation of the fine line between familiarity and objectivity, confronting biases and ensuring a balanced analysis.

Engaging with my community in a scholarly context reinforced the importance of reciprocity and ethical responsibility in research. I felt a strong duty to ensure that the outcomes of my research would be beneficial and meaningful to the community, emphasising that the research was not just an academic exercise but a contribution to the community's cultural and spiritual well-being. This participatory approach was instrumental in maintaining ethical integrity and ensuring that the research respected the community's values and traditions.

Chapter summary

The exploration of spectral communication and spectral thinking among the Ibans, encompassing dreams, voices of gods, and ancestors, presents a plausible avenue for future research in sociolinguistics. This study provides insights into how the Ibans navigate their beliefs in spectral beings and supernatural phenomena, including their interpretation of dreams and ancestral voices. Moving forward, researchers can expand upon this foundation by probing deeper into spectral communication's cognitive and cultural aspects. Investigating how Ibans envisage and interpret spectral experiences, such as dreams, animal signs and omens, can shed light on the socio-cultural construction of reality and belief systems within the community. Comparative studies across different cultural contexts can offer insights into universal and specific patterns of spectral communication, enriching our understanding of the human experience of the supernatural.

One of the main implications of the study is the recognition and acceptance of non-human or non-present voices in research. The Iban practices highlight how communication with spirits, gods, and ancestors is integral to their culture. This challenges conventional research paradigms, often prioritising human-centric perspectives and presenting empirical evidence. By acknowledging the validity of spectral communication, the study opens new avenues for understanding and incorporating non-human and non-present voices in scholarly research. This has broader implications for the humanities and social sciences, encouraging scholars to expand their methodologies to include varied forms of knowledge and communication.

8.4 Last words

Reflecting on this academic journey and the broader implications of the research conducted, I am reminded of the interdisciplinary nature of this venture. Conducting this dissertation, I find that Ana Deumert's (2018, 2022) ideas on the sociolinguistics of the spectres are very useful in understanding the phenomena of the sociolinguistic landscape of the Ibans of Sarawak, particularly in the context of spectral beliefs and the *miring practice*. The insights gleaned from this study point out the essential role of understanding spectral communication, spectral thinking and ritual manifestations within the Iban's way of life with their spirit world. This research contributes to a more overarching understanding of spectral thinking by situating spectral beliefs within the sociolinguistics of the spectres.

By acknowledging the sociolinguistic of the spectres and *miring* rituals, educators and policymakers can better tailor community engagement programs to meet indigenous communities' many different cultural needs, like the Ibans.

As I conclude this thesis, I am filled with optimism regarding the potential impact of this study on the transformation of individuals and communities. This research contributes, in its modest way, to cultivating a more equitable and inclusive world where spectral thinking is acknowledged and included. I invite future scholars and educators to continue this critical discourse and exploration of spectral communication and thinking among the Ibans and beyond.

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