

***Kandan*, the Uut Danum “language of spirits” :  
A traditional oral genre and its use in shamanic rituals**

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**Abstract**

*Kandan* is a poetic sung oral style – what the Uut Danum like to call a “language” (*auh*) – which pertains both to oral literature and ritual speech. As a literary genre (*kandan koLimoy*), it relates to a cycle of epic narratives about the inhabitants of the sky, god-like beings distantly related to mankind. As a ritual genre, *kandan* is used most prominently in the chants performed by the female officiants of shamanic curing rituals, either in a solo (*kandan* proper, or *totingan*) or choral singing mode (*timang*, with a lead singer and one or several responders). Narrating a cosmic journey undergone by the patients' souls, these chants are addressed to upperworld (and other) spirits, which are referred to in this context by the term *Songiang*, hence *kandan* is known as the “*Songiang*'s language”. During curing sessions, when the spirits talk through the voices of possessed shamans, they communicate in *kandan*, shifting occasionally to everyday language (Dohoi) to engage in often comic dialogues with the human audience. The paper's aim is twofold. First, to provide a general description of this little-studied genre and explore its relationship with the more well-known *Basa Sangiang* of the Ngaju. Various borrowing processes – from everyday Ngaju to *kandan*, from *Basa Sangiang* to *kandan*, from Dohoi to *Basa Sangiang*, and from Banjar to *kandan* via *Basa Sangiang* – may account for the close resemblance between the two ritual languages, along with a putative “old-speech stratum” common to Dohoi and Ngaju. The geographical remoteness of the upper Melawi Uut Danum of West Kalimantan from Ngaju-populated areas makes them an interesting case for assessing such processes since Melawi Dohoi, unlike Central Kalimantan Dohoi, is uninfluenced by Ngaju. I will describe *kandan*'s main stylistic features in contrast to those of other semi-improvised genres such as *parung* and *tahtum*, and illustrate how the drum accompaniment of *timang* chants, with its varied rhythmic patterns, shape the form (versification) of these chants in contrast to the free-flowing character of solo incantations. The second part of the paper focuses on communication with spirits in shamanic rituals, particularly on the possession séances of some elaborated rituals (*hoboLian* and *nyakay*) which take on a marked theatrical quality and involve some amount of language games. I will argue that *kandan*, a female genre unfamiliar to most men, expresses the alterity of the *Songiang* as a parallel heavenly society with which ritual relationships are maintained. I will illustrate how shamans and other officiants in shamanic rituals embody this alterity and act as intermediaries and translators between the spirits and the audience. When the *songiang* shift from *kandan* to Dohoi to converse with the audience more directly, a sense of their foreignness is maintained, conveyed by the many language errors they commit. Illustrations will be provided of such simulated mistakes (mispronounced terms, puns, semantic reversals, breaches of language etiquette, unusual exclamations, childish intonations).