

Echoes of a Vanishing Voice: A Linguistic and Ethnopoetic Analysis of a Betawi Peripheral Incantation from Meruya

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Abstract

This study investigates a rare and endangered Betawi incantation recalled by the researcher from her late grandmother, a Betawi pinggiran (peripheral Betawi) speaker from Meruya, West Jakarta. As oral traditions within the Betawi community continue to decline, such individual recollections provide invaluable linguistic and cultural evidence of Jakarta's indigenous heritage. Using a linguistic-ethnographic and ethnopoetic framework, the study analyzes the incantation's lexical composition, phonological structure, and symbolic-semantic dimensions. The lexical analysis reveals hybrid influences from Betawi, Javanese, and Sundanese, while the phonological reconstruction identifies distinct Betawi markers such as vowel reduction and glottalization. Patterns of repetition and rhythmic symmetry further suggest an oral-formulaic organization characteristic of Austronesian ritual poetics. Although reconstructed from memory without acoustic data, the text functions as a living linguistic record of contact-induced adaptation and spiritual continuity. This research contributes to the documentation and theoretical understanding of Betawi ritual speech, demonstrating how memory functions as both data and method in preserving intangible cultural heritage.

Keywords: Betawi incantation, oral tradition, linguistic ethnography, ethnopoetics, language contact

Introduction

Across the Indonesian archipelago, mantra (ritual incantations performed in rhythmic and poetic form) constitute one of the most enduring legacies of oral tradition. These verbal performances act not only as expressions of spirituality but also as repositories of cultural memory, uniting communities through rhythm, repetition, and belief (Chambert-Loir, 2010; Sundari, 2020). In many traditional societies, mantra function as multivalent tools of healing, protection, and moral reinforcement, simultaneously preserving ancient cosmologies through linguistic artistry. However, in the context of modern urbanization and linguistic homogenization, these oral traditions have become increasingly marginalized. As

intergenerational transmission weakens, mantra practices continue to decline, threatening the continuity of local knowledge systems.

Among the communities most affected by this cultural erosion are the Betawi people, the indigenous inhabitants of Jakarta. Their ethnolinguistic identity developed through centuries of intense multilingual contact—among Malay, Sundanese, Javanese, Balinese, Chinese, and Arab settlers—culminating in a deeply syncretic cultural matrix (Sneddon, 2004). Although extensive studies have examined Betawi performing arts such as lenong and gambang kromong, and dialectal distinctions between Betawi Tengah (central) and Betawi Pinggiran (peripheral) (Darsita, 2017; Rahman, 2021), the ritual-linguistic register of Betawi

incantations remains largely undocumented. This absence creates a significant gap in understanding the linguistic ecology of Betawi identity. Unlike Javanese, Sundanese, or Balinese incantations, each of which has received considerable scholarly attention (Rahardi, 2015; Widodo, 2012), Betawi incantations have rarely been documented or analyzed. Consequently, much of their linguistic and symbolic richness risks being lost before it can be properly understood.

This study originated from a personal ethnolinguistic encounter. The researcher, a descendant of a Betawi pinggiran family from Meruya, West Jakarta, recalled a short incantation transmitted by her grandmother, a local *dukun kampung* (traditional healer). During an informal conversation, the grandmother recited a few remembered lines, an utterance intertwining Betawi, Javanese, and Sundanese lexical elements in a single melodic continuum.

The rhythm, timbre, and hybrid lexicon of the chant reflected both the depth of oral memory and the linguistic syncretism characteristic of peripheral Betawi speech. This moment of intergenerational transmission became the impetus for preserving and analyzing the text as a living record of Betawi linguistic heritage.

The recited text, transcribed and analyzed in this study, reflects a linguistic mosaic shaped by centuries of cultural interaction in the western and southern edges of Jakarta. Its mixture of vocabulary and prosody demonstrates how Betawi ritual speech functions as a contact language, where external linguistic elements are absorbed, reinterpreted, and localized through Betawi phonology and rhythm. The coexistence of words like *tudung*, *asih*, *yunda*, and *ngirat* illustrates a process of linguistic and cultural negotiation: each borrowed term becomes naturalized through the oral and spiritual framework of the community. Such adaptability underscores the vitality of Betawi identity, even as its ritual forms recede from everyday life.

Acknowledging the limited scholarship on Betawi ritual speech, this study employs a linguistic-ethnographic and ethnopoetic approach to examine the chant's structure, sound, and meaning. It applies theoretical insights from oral-formulaic composition (Lord, 1960), ethnopoetics (Hymes, 1981), and language

contact theory (Thomason & Kaufman, 1988) to interpret how rhythm, repetition, and lexical hybridity function as mechanisms of cultural memory. Through integrated textual, phonological, and symbolic analysis, this study aims to demonstrate that the Betawi incantation operates as both linguistic artifact and performative event, reflecting the dialectic between preservation and transformation in oral tradition.

Ultimately, this study aims to contribute to the documentation and understanding of Betawi ritual language as a fading yet vital expression of Jakarta's indigenous heritage. By analyzing a single chant preserved through oral memory, it underscores the urgent need to safeguard such forms of intangible culture before they vanish entirely. More than a record of words, the present work is an act of listening, to a grandmother's voice, to a community's layered history, and to the subtle rhythm of a language that continues to survive in the city's quieter corners.

Method

This study adopts a qualitative linguistic-ethnographic design, emphasizing textual interpretation and cultural contextualization as its analytical foundations. The core data comprise a single Betawi incantation text reconstructed from the researcher's oral memory of her late grandmother's recitation.

The absence of audio documentation constitutes both a limitation and a methodological condition: although it constrains phonetic precision, it provides an opportunity to foreground memory as a data source and to explore how linguistic intuition functions within intergenerational knowledge transmission. This reflective methodological stance aligns with autoethnographic approaches in linguistic anthropology, where the researcher's position forms part of the analytical framework.

Data Source and Collection

The data for this study consist of one memory-based oral text, transcribed and reconstructed by the researcher based on repeated exposure during childhood. The grandmother, a native Betawi woman from Meruya, West Jakarta, known locally as a *dukun kampung* (traditional healer), acted as both primary informant and cultural transmitter.

Following her passing, the researcher undertook a detailed recollection process to reconstruct the incantation's lexical sequence, rhythm, and phrasing. The resulting text thus represents a hybrid ethnographic artifact, part oral memory, part linguistic reconstruction.

This methodological choice aligns with documentary practices in oral-tradition studies, particularly when primary informants are no longer available (Hymes, 1981; Finnegan, 2012; Vansina, 1985). The emphasis on recalled repetition provides insight into how cultural forms persist through mnemonic patterns rather than written transmission.

Analytical Framework

The analysis proceeded across three interrelated dimensions: (1) lexical composition, (2) phonological and prosodic structure, and (3) semantic-symbolic meaning.

1. Lexical Analysis focused on identifying the etymological origins and integration of words derived from Betawi, Javanese, and Sundanese, assessing how borrowed elements underwent phonological domestication within the Betawi linguistic system. Comparative linguistic resources (Sneddon, 2004; Darsita, 2017; Rahardi, 2015) were employed alongside contemporary online databases to ensure terminological precision.
2. Phonological and Prosodic Analysis was performed through phonemic reconstruction and rhythmic recall. The researcher applied ethnopoetic transcription techniques (Hymes, 1981) to mark line breaks, stress, and repetition, thereby approximating the chant's sonic structure despite the absence of recorded audio. Special focus was given to vowel reduction, nasal clusters, and glottal stops, which typify Betawi phonology (Rahman, 2021).
3. Semantic and Symbolic Analysis drew upon semiotic and cultural-linguistic interpretation, relating metaphoric expressions to Betawi cosmology and broader Austronesian ritual systems (Chambert-Loir, 2010; Sundari, 2020). Repetitive lines such as "hentakan asih, asihan atinya si anu" were analyzed not only as mnemonic formulas but also as ritual performatives that activate emotional resonance and social intent.

Ethnographic Positioning

As both a descendant and observer of the Betawi pinggiran community, the researcher's dual positionality required critical reflexivity. This insider-outsider stance enabled access to implicit cultural knowledge but necessitated vigilance against subjective idealization of the remembered text.

Field notes were systematically recorded after each reconstruction session, documenting memory triggers, phonological uncertainty, and affective responses during recall. These reflexive records functioned as meta-data, supporting transparency in the interpretive process.

Consequently, the text was approached as a cultural memory artifact, combining linguistic documentation with autoethnographic testimony, consistent with methodologies in heritage linguistics and reflexive ethnography (Davies, 2008).

Data Validation and Interpretation

Given the absence of living informants, data validation relied on cross-linguistic comparison and textual triangulation. Lexemes such as *ngirat*, *yunda*, and *nggerung* were analyzed against equivalent forms in Javanese, Sundanese, and Malay ritual lexicons to establish plausible semantic correspondences.

Where direct validation was not possible, interpretive reliability was enhanced through intertextual analysis, comparing the structure and rhythm of the text to other documented Indonesian incantations.

The interpretive framework drew on oral-formulaic theory (Lord, 1960) and ethnopoetic principles (Hymes, 1981), situating the reconstructed chant within a comparative typology of Austronesian ritual speech.

Limitations

This study recognizes several inherent methodological constraints:

1. The dataset consists of a single remembered version without phonetic or performative recording.
2. Phonological interpretations derive from reconstructed recall rather than acoustic measurement.
3. Cultural meanings are inferred through secondary comparison, not participant observation.

Despite these constraints, the research holds significant preservational value. In contexts where oral traditions are endangered and knowledge bearers have passed away, memory-based reconstruction remains both methodologically legitimate and ethically necessary (Finnegan, 2012; Davies, 2008).

Accordingly, this study should be viewed not merely as a linguistic analysis, but as an act of cultural recovery, capturing, through textual representation, the resonance of a vanishing voice.

Results and Discussion

Result

The analysis of the reconstructed Betawi incantation reveals several salient linguistic and ethno poetic characteristics, each illustrating the dynamic and contact-driven evolution of Betawi pinggirian dialects. For clarity, the findings are categorized into four interrelated dimensions:

- 1) Lexical structure and language contact,
- 2) Phonological realization,
- 3) Rhythmic and prosodic organization, and
- 4) Semantic and symbolic content.

This section also integrates illustrative tables to clarify lexical correspondences and rhythmic patterns, facilitating reproducibility and comparative linguistic interpretation.

1. Lexical Structure and Language Contact

The lexical analysis identifies a richly layered linguistic structure that demonstrates cross-linguistic borrowing and semantic domestication processes. Table 1 summarizes representative examples of this hybridization:

Table 1. Lexical correspondences in the Betawi incantation

Word	Probable Origin	Gloss / Function	Cultural Note
<i>tudung</i>	Betawi	to cover / shade	Associated with ritual protection
<i>asih</i>	Betawi / Javanese	affection / compassion	Central emotional motif in incantations
<i>ngirat</i>	Javanese (<i>ngirad</i>)	to cut / separate	Used in "severing" or cleansing rituals
<i>yunda</i>	Javanese	elder sister (honorific)	Symbolic of feminine or ancestral power

Word	Probable Origin	Gloss / Function	Cultural Note
<i>madap wae</i>	Sundanese	face only / look toward	Formulaic invocation to spirits or ancestors
<i>tunjung</i>	Javanese–Sundanese	lotus	Symbol of purity and ascension

This hybrid pattern confirms that the text originates from a multilingual contact zone, where Betawi speakers incorporated foreign lexemes into ritual performance. Such lexical domestication reflects the fluid boundaries of ritual language, in which semantic value is localized through phonological adaptation and performative context.

2. Phonological Realization

The phonological reconstruction highlights consistent Betawi segmental and suprasegmental features embedded within the multilingual lexicon. These include:

1. Vowel reduction of unstressed syllables (/ə/), e.g., *mentari* → [mən'tari];
2. Glottal stop insertion at terminal positions (/ʔ/), e.g., *tunduk* → [ˈtundʊʔ];
3. Nasal clusters such as /ŋg/ in *nggerung*, preserving nasal–velar continuity;
4. Rhythmic open vowels in iterative segments (*ala, wala, aki*), which reinforce melodic cadence.

These features constitute phonological evidence of Betawi identity maintenance within a mixed linguistic repertoire. The phenomenon supports the concept of a ritual phonological filter—a system through which borrowed lexemes are assimilated via local articulation norms. Such adaptation mechanisms correspond to contact-induced phonological nativization processes observed in multilingual speech communities (Tedlock, 1983).

3. Rhythmic and Prosodic Organization

The prosodic analysis reveals that the chant's rhythmic design follows a metrical alternation between trochaic and iambic feet, averaging 8–9 syllables per line, consistent with oral-formulaic typologies across Austronesian ritual poetry.

A schematic representation is presented below:

Table 2. Rhythmic and prosodic structure of selected lines

Line (Romanized)	Metrical Pattern	Dominant Stress	Function
<i>Tudung ala payung ala</i>	Trochaic (‘˘˘˘˘)	initial stress	Opening invocation
<i>Semar gusti mangku ngirat mangku yunda</i>	Mixed iambic– trochaic	alternating stress	Invocation of spiritual mediator
<i>Hentakan asih, asih an atinya si anu</i>	Trochaic repetition	iterative stress	Emotive and mnemonic intensification

The repetition of “hentakan asih, asihan atinya si anu” serves dual functions:

- 1) Mnemonic reinforcement facilitating oral retention;
- 2) Performative amplification, heightening ritual intensity through rhythm.

This rhythmic architecture exemplifies the oral-formulaic principle of composition-by-iteration (Lord, 1960) and aligns with ethnopoetic rhythmic symmetry observed in other regional incantations (Maulana, 2019; Widodo, 2012).

4. Semantic and Symbolic Dimensions

The semantic analysis highlights a symbolic system governed by binary opposition and cosmological dualism, recurring across the text. Lexical pairs such as *tunduk*–*hentak* and *ngirat*–*yunda* encode dialectical relationships—submission vs. assertion, separation vs. union—paralleling dualistic patterns in Javanese ritual lexicons (*ngiris*–*nggandheng*, Hadiwijono, 2016). Moreover, the imagery of *tunjung* (lotus) and *asih* (affection) evokes spiritual purity and emotional equilibrium, key values in syncretic Betawi spirituality. The closing invocation *madap wae wala aki* operates as a formula of ancestral address, representing continuity between the living and the ancestral realm, a feature characteristic of Sundanese-Betawi ritual syncretism (Sundari, 2020).

Taken together, these elements portray the incantation as a linguistic microcosm of Betawi cosmology, where animism, Hindu-Buddhist symbolism, and Islamic mysticism coexist through verbal mediation.

5. Synthesis of Findings

In synthesis, the findings collectively demonstrate that the examined Betawi incantation embodies:

1. Linguistic hybridization, merging Betawi phonology with Javanese–Sundanese lexical strata;
2. Formulaic prosody, sustaining ritual rhythm through patterned repetition;
3. Symbolic dualism, reflecting cosmological binaries of unity and separation; and
4. Cultural negotiation, in which linguistic adaptation sustains community identity.

Overall, the chant functions as a dynamic repository of contact-induced linguistic change and as an index of Betawi cultural continuity. This synthesis supports the broader hypothesis that peripheral dialects operate as linguistic laboratories, preserving contact phenomena that mainstream dialects often homogenize.

Discussion

The findings confirm that the analyzed Betawi incantation embodies a contact-induced linguistic hybridity characterized by lexical borrowing, phonological convergence, and prosodic repetition. This configuration strongly supports existing scholarship on the syncretic identity of Betawi peripheral communities, particularly in contact zones along Jakarta’s western and southern peripheries (Darsita, 2017; Rahman, 2021).

The recurring lexical and phonological blend found in forms such as *ngirat*, *yunda*, and *nggerung* substantiates the presence of a Betawi–Javanese–Sundanese contact continuum, operating as a linguistic interface that shapes ritual registers.

Beyond confirming previous descriptions, this study extends them by demonstrating that ritual speech, rather than conversational code-mixing, serves as a key site of language contact, where sacred formulae evolve as performative adaptations to multilingual reality.

The chant’s formulaic repetition and metrical alternation closely align with Maulana’s (2019) observation that mantra Betawi deploy repetitive structures as mnemonic devices and ritual intensifiers. The present analysis further refines this claim by linking prosodic alternation to breath control and performative embodiment, a

dimension central to ritual phonetics (cf. Rahardi, 2015; Widodo, 2012).

The alternation of trochaic and iambic stress patterns serves not only aesthetic but also physiological functions, facilitating chant endurance and enhancing affective salience of emotionally charged lexemes such as *asih* ('affection'), *hentak* ('strike'), and *tunduk* ('submit'). This observation underscores that prosody in Betawi incantations is not a passive poetic trait, but an active semiotic tool mediating between rhythm, emotion, and ritual efficacy.

The semantic reconstruction of *ngirat* (derived from Javanese *ngirad*, "to cut" or "to separate") corroborates Hadiwijono's (2016) ethnolinguistic findings on the metaphorical role of cutting as a symbolic act of purification and boundary-making within ritual language.

Simultaneously, *tunjung* ('lotus') encapsulates imagery of purity and spiritual awakening, aligning with motifs present in Sundanese and Betawi ritual poetics (Sundari, 2020). These symbolic patterns confirm that the Betawi chant shares semantic isomorphism with broader Austronesian cosmological models, in which dualistic action verbs (e.g., cut/unite, bind/sever) and sacred flora serve as metaphoric mediators between the human and divine. Such correspondences demonstrate that the Betawi mantra operates within a shared regional semiotic field, even while expressing distinct local phonological features.

The phonological data (glottalization, vowel reduction, and nasal cluster retention) affirm the distinct Betawi prosodic identity even amid multilingual lexical input (Rahman, 2021). Such persistence across hybrid vocabulary layers substantiates the view that Betawi ritual language operates as a self-regulating linguistic ecology, whereby foreign phonemes undergo adaptive domestication.

In this context, the term "linguistic ecology" (Haugen, 1972; Sneddon, 2004) is particularly useful, emphasizing how phonological adaptation functions as cultural resilience. The ritual register thereby acts as a filter of linguistic syncretism, preserving local sound systems while accommodating external influence, a phenomenon also documented in Chambert-Loir (2010) and more recently in Tedlock (1983).

Taken collectively, the results strengthen the interpretation that Betawi incantations function as interactive sites of linguistic convergence and cultural negotiation, rather than static linguistic artifacts. They represent performative ecologies where form, function, and faith intersect. The observed phonetic and rhythmic adaptations not only sustain the performative continuity of oral tradition, but also encode the sociohistorical hybridity and multilingual resilience of Betawi peripheral communities.

Future investigations should integrate acoustic phonetic analysis, sociophonetic mapping, and comparative ethnopoetic modeling across Betawi-speaking regions to elucidate the gradient variability of this ritual register. Such interdisciplinary approaches could bridge linguistics, anthropology, and performance studies, enhancing the global relevance of Betawi linguistic heritage within the field of intangible cultural linguistics.

Conclusions

This research has systematically investigated a rare Betawi incantation from the peripheral community of Meruya, applying a linguistic-ethnographic and ethnopoetic framework to its lexical, phonological, prosodic, and symbolic dimensions. The findings confirm that the text encapsulates a dynamic synthesis of Betawi, Javanese, and Sundanese linguistic elements, each reflecting the longstanding multilingual contact and sociohistorical hybridity that characterizes Betawi fringe regions such as Tangerang, Parung, and Ciputat. By treating the chant not merely as a textual artifact but as a performative linguistic event, this study demonstrates how ritual language functions as a medium of cultural resilience in multilingual urban ecologies.

At the lexical level, the chant demonstrates contact-induced integration of Betawi, Javanese, and Sundanese vocabulary, yet retains a stable Betawi phonetic foundation. This confirms that the Betawi ritual register functions as a performative contact code, where borrowing operates for aesthetic, symbolic, and rhythmic effect rather than for communicative necessity. The phonological domestication of external lexemes, through vowel reduction, glottal insertion, and nasal cluster retention, underscores

the chanter's dialectal self-identification even in multilingual performance contexts. Such findings highlight the Betawi ritual register as an exemplary case of phonological resilience in contact linguistics, demonstrating how ritual performance stabilizes linguistic identity under hybrid conditions.

Phonetically and prosodically, the chant's alternating trochaic and iambic meters generate a measured rhythmic cadence that reinforces both mnemonic retention and ritual potency. The recurrent formula "hentakan asih, asihan atinya si anu" functions as a ritual refrain, embodying the oral-formulaic principle of redundancy for emotional amplification and cognitive recall. These rhythmic and prosodic features position Betawi mantra within the comparative typology of Austronesian ritual poetics, illustrating how metric repetition operates simultaneously as a linguistic strategy and a spiritual technology.

Semantically, the chant articulates a dualistic cosmology in which *ngirat* (severing) and *yunda* (binding) represent complementary ritual actions, mirroring Javanese symbolic systems but reinterpreted through a Betawi linguistic lens. The invocation *madap wae wala aki* invokes ancestral guardianship, revealing the persistence of animistic reverence within a syncretic Muslim-Betawi cosmology. Consequently, the text operates as both a linguistic artifact and a spiritual ethnography, embodying the fusion of local belief systems that define Betawi identity.

In conclusion, this research advances our understanding of Betawi peripheral dialects as dynamic linguistic ecologies where identity, memory, and multilingualism converge. It establishes that Betawi incantations constitute living systems of linguistic performance, perpetually reshaped by cross-ethnic interaction, oral inheritance, and adaptive ritualization. By framing mantra Betawi as a site of contact-induced linguistic creativity, the study offers a methodological model for documenting endangered oral traditions through memory-based reconstruction.

Future work should expand this foundation by incorporating acoustic phonetic analyses, comparative sociophonetic studies, and regional ethno poetic mapping. Such approaches will not only strengthen linguistic evidence but also enhance the global visibility of Betawi intangible

heritage within the disciplines of linguistics, anthropology, and folklore studies.

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