

The Melodious Sounds of Musical Practices from the Upper Baram River: Theoretical consideration in documenting the musical tradition of the Kelabit tribe in Sarawak, Malaysia

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Abstract

The beautiful sounds of the musical practices among the Kelabit people (hill tribe) from the upper Baram river in Sarawak is yet to be revealed. The Kelabit at approximately 1800 people are one of the smallest hill tribe groups that inhabit the Borneo Island. Like many other indigenous communities in the highlands of Sarawak, the Kelabit live in longhouses located along the tributaries of the Baram river. They still maintain certain aspects of their culture including musical practices and dance. The sape, a plucked-lute instrument is one of the notable traditional musical instruments performed by the Kelabit in many social and ritual occasions. Other than that, a few blowing and drumming instruments are also performed in that area. To approach this type of musical practices, I have utilized theories from the field of ethnomusicology. Based on my preliminary study, I started to shape this study by considering some theoretical suggestions made by various scholars as well as my own views. This paper contributes not only to ethnomusicological theory and method, but also to a deeper understanding of Kelabit's musical culture.

THE BACKGROUND

The Kelabit at approximately 5000 people, are one of the smallest ethnic groups in the state of Sarawak. Historically, they are a highland community that inhabit the Kelabit Highlands, a highland plateau with an altitude approximately 1000 meters above sea level and situated above the furthest reaches of the navigable rivers of Baram and Limbang Districts of North-eastern Sarawak. Currently there are about 1800 people living in the highlands while most of them now live outside the highlands. They moved out mostly to get further education and to get jobs that suit their qualifications in towns and cities like Miri, Kuching, Sibul, Bintulu, Kuala Lumpur and other places overseas. Many are involved in a range of professional occupations.

The Kelabit in the highlands, like many other indigenous communities in Sarawak live in longhouses, although recently many families built single houses scattered around in the villages. Today, there are 16 villages in the area, which include Pa'Umur, Pa' Ukat, Pa' Lungun, (located along the Depbur basin), Long Dano, Pa Dalih, Ramudu (located along Kelapang basin), and Pa Ramapuh Benah, Pa Ramapuh Dita, Pa Derung, Ulung Palang Dita, Ulung Palang Benah, Padang Pasir, Kampung Baru, Arur Layun, Bario Asal and Arur Dalan, in the Merariu river basin. There are four other Kelabit settlements

located further down the tributaries of the Baram River which are Long Peluan, Long Seridan, Long Lellang and Long Napir.

Even though the Kelabit have gone through a rapid social and economic change within the very short span of 50 years, they have managed to maintain certain aspects of their culture which are still unique, particularly their music and dance. A traditional musical instrument is the *sape*, a plucked lute instrument. It is carved from tree trunk in an elongated rectangular shape with a homogenous neck extending from one end of the body. Formerly, its three or four strings were made from finely split rattan, but today they are made of wire strings. The Kelabit also play the pagang (tube zither), which is made from a length of bamboo tube closed at both ends by its natural bamboo nodes. The strings are finely cut strips from the surface of the bamboo tube itself, which are still attached to the tube at either end. The Kelabit use the sape and pagang music to dance their lovely hornbill and warrior dances, long dances and single dances. The hornbill dance is performed in imitation of the hornbill bird. Hornbill birds are beautiful, shy and very gracious. Many natives in Sarawak adore them, so try to imitate their movements.

The Kelabit, like many other indigenous people in the Borneo Island, do not have a written language. So most of their oral stories, which include legends, myths and other folklore, were passed down orally. However, recently the local people have taken efforts to record this invaluable knowledge. One other important element to the Kelabit cultural heritage is the Irau Mekaa Ngadan/Irau Naru Ngadan. Many young Kelabit strongly adhere to the practice. It is held both as an act of gratitude and thanksgiving to God for providing a married couple with children. Every year, many young Kelabit parents, whether they are from the town or currently living in the highlands, carry out the ceremony.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

There is a pressing need to strengthen Malaysian awareness of their indigenous cultural and musical traditions, less they be engulfed by an irreversible tide of exclusively Western thought and expression. Along with many other contemporary societies today, Malaysia has continued to pursue development in politics, economics, education, and culture under the slogan of internationalization. This slogan fosters a genuine sense of world unity among nations and people. At the same time, it cultivates a counter-movement in Kelabit and elsewhere that calls for a strengthened national and cultural identity. It is thought that the development by Malaysian knowledge of their culture is as important as cultivation of their awareness of people across the globe.

AIMS OF THE RESEARCH

The aim of this research is to present the type of musical practices among the Kelabit tribe in upper Baram river of Sarawak. In so doing, the musical contents will be thoroughly analyzed based on the musical characteristics of each music.

Further, this study also aims to thoroughly describe the types of musical instruments from the organological perspective. Alan Merriam (1964:45) suggested that, in the study of musical instruments, each of them must be measured, and either drawn to scale or photographed. In addition, the description of the instrument must include the principles of construction, materials used, and decoration patterns; methods and techniques of performance, musical ranges, tones and theoretical scale are also to be noted. In so doing, firstly, consistent with the foregoing, the construction techniques used in making the instruments used by the Kelabit people must be examined methodically. Additionally, as suggested, the playing techniques as well as the performance practice of the selected instruments within the Kelabit culture must be observed in detail in addition to fully describing the unique aspects of the instrument. It is also equally important to evaluate

the timbre, volume and range of the instruments when used in traditional functions as well as in contemporary uses.

This study also intends to analyze the musical style of selected types of musical activities in the Kelabit society. Stephen Blum (1993:165) argued that most studies of musical styles have been relative and endeavour to differentiate between two or more styles within the practice of one particular region. Researchers also regularly attempt to compare the styles of two or more people or to show that different styles of music are associated with specific types of economic activity or social organization. Parallel to this, in this study I will collect and record as far as possible relevant music from the repertoire in Kelabit society. The recorded material will then be transcribed using the western style of music notation in order to represent the music for the purpose of analysis. Each element of transcribed music will be compared and cross-referenced in order to fully understand its style. In so doing, I am aware that the transcription does not fully represent the complexity of the Kelabit's music, but the main purpose of the transcription is to provide an analysis for the description of the music. In other words, the music transcription is not the main purpose of this study, but as a descriptive tool in describing the music of the Kelabit.

In addition, the aim of this research is also to determine the roles of the music in Kelabit society. This aim is to describe the roles of selected musical practices in Kelabit society by defining its ceremonial uses and discussing the relationship of the drum to the Kelabit culture. Alan Merriam (1964:224-225), outlined three important functions of music in society, which are: enforcing conformity to the social norm, validating social institutions and religious ritual, and contributing to the continuity and stability of culture. He also argued that "every society has occasions signalled by music which draw its members together and remind them of their unity" (Ibid: 227). Based on Merriam's argument, it is necessary to examine the roles of the kompong both in traditional functions as well as in contemporary society. The changes to Kelabit music made by contemporary users will also be analyzed in this study following a suggestion made by John Blacking (1995:153). In his theoretical discussion, Blacking suggests that musical changes must be given a special status in the study of social and culture changes. This is because the role of music as mediator between nature and culture in man combines cognitive and affective elements in a unique way.

THEORITICAL APPROACHES

Accompanied by the Melodious sound of the sape, the Kelabit people sing and dance to celebrate joyful occasions. To approach this type of musical performance, I have utilized theories from the field of ethnomusicology. Based on my preliminary study of this musical activities, I started to shape this study by considering some suggestions made by various scholars. First of all, the focus of this study was heavily influenced by Helen Myers's suggestion. Myers (1992:3) suggests that the study in this field should include the conceptual issues of the music such as the origin and the changes in the music, the roles of the music in the society, the symbol, universal in music, the musical system and the biological basis of music. In further shaping the focus of this study, I have also taken into consideration Bruno Nettl's doctrines for the ethnomusicologist. Nettl (1983:9) suggests that an ethnomusicologist should make an effort to study the total musical system as accepted by the entire society as its own in order to understand them. The concern should also focus on what is typical of a culture. Furthermore, music must be understood as part of culture and a product of human society. Therefore, the study should let a culture musically define itself and the study must also include musical changes. These comments are common in ethnomusicology writing.

As sape performance is an important element of Kelabit culture, my study on this issue draws upon Alan Merriam's (1964:6) concept – "the study of music as culture". This concept implies a relationship between music and culture and it invites a thorough investigation to understand this relationship. In so doing, I accepted Bruno Nettl's (1983:136-140) suggestion of four approaches in viewing the music and

culture relationship. Firstly, an enumerative approach is used to show the relationship. This approach is based on the suggestion that culture consists of a large number of separate components, interrelated to each other and one should study each culture and the components individually. Secondly, another way of looking at the music and culture relationship is to see what music does, and what it contributes to the complex whole of culture. Just like human organs, the components of the culture are interrelated and contribute something to the whole. The interrelationship and interdependencies of the components are paralleled by the same kinds of relationships among the domains of culture. Thirdly, an approach which involves the hypothesis that there is core or centre for each culture, a basic idea or set of ideas, whose nature shapes the character of the other domains, including music. Fourthly, it envisions a line of relationships leading from a major value of a culture to music.

In the study of music as culture, with the influx of foreign elements, I realized that the Kelabit culture is dynamic. Consequently, I could not avoid a focus in my study falling on cultural change which also implies musical change. Regardless of how one views the culture, changes are occurring in human experience. In approaching this issue, I applied Alan Merriam's two points of view on cultural change. Merriam (1964:303) suggests that it can be observed either as it has occurred in the past or as it is occurring in the present. As cultural change also leads to musical change in the society, I have also taken into account the changes in Kelabit music in this study. In so doing, I have examined the changes of the Kelabit music corresponding to John Blacking's suggestion. In his discussion of musical change, Blacking suggests that,

“The study of musical change must be concerned eventually with significant innovations in music sound, but innovations in music sound are not necessarily evidence of musical change. If the concept of musical change is to have any heuristic value, it must denote significant changes that are peculiar to musical systems, and not simply the musical consequences of social, political, economic, or other changes” (Blacking, 1995:150).

In approaching the study of the changes in Kelabit music, I also examined Alan Lomax's culture-based theory of musical change. Lomax's theory is based on the assumption that musical variations are related to variations in culture, and that there are correlations between musical and cultural change (Lomax, 1972:228-239). To broaden my approach in the study of the changes in the komping music especially in contemporary society, I also considered Bruno Nettl's view on this issue. Nettl (1964:232) notes that music structures cannot be explained with reference to other cultural phenomena unless it is understood that the relations between them are not causal. Musical change is not caused by contact among people and cultures or the movement of the populations, but it is brought about by decisions made by individuals about music making and music on the basis of their experiences of music and attitudes to it in different social contacts.

Inevitably, my study of musical change is focused on observable phenomena that are regarded as musical by various groups of people. The aim of such study is to understand the musical processes that generate the Kelabit music produced such as live sape performance and recorded materials. Thus, in the context of Kelabit music, my area of focus is not a particular musical style but the musical and social experience of communities who make and consume the music. In analyzing the change of musical practices in Kelabit society, I also considered one of the situations listed by John Blacking (1995:168-170) in which musical change maybe found. The situation is a combination of social factors such as a tradition of professional musicians, the expansion of radio programmes, and a growth of national feeling that can precipitate a burst of individual creativity. To give a good example of this situation, see John Baily's account (1977) of the rapid development of the fourteen-stringed *dutar* and the increase of musical activity in the city of Herat, Afghanistan. Taking advantage of a similar situation, a few years ago, John Baily also conducted fieldwork in Kabul to see the changes in musical activities in Afghanistan in the post-Taliban era.

This situation is clearly demonstrated in a film¹ made by John Baily about the professional musician, and the recording industry as well as national feeling that prompted individual creativity.

As my intention is to discover and present extensive information about musical practices in the Kelabit society, my study has drawn upon ethnomusicological approaches that have also been adopted by many other ethnomusicologists. To that end, in this study, I adopted both “armchair” research and the fieldwork approach. The “armchair” research as described by Helen Myers (1992:22) is like that of historical musicologists who glean data from archives and libraries. Even though the historical data of my study were mostly gathered through “armchair” research, I also adopted the historical fieldwork approach which was much influenced by Philip Bohlman’s work. Bohlman used fieldwork methodologies to rebuild the musical landscape of Jewish religious life in the province of Burgenland, Austria. Based on his experience, Bohlman suggests that the past not only reflects itself to the fieldwork process but that certain historical conditions require a fieldwork approach. Based on the memory of present-day society and on the surviving physical spaces of practices, he theorizes fluid in scopes between the ethnomusicological past and present (Bohlman, 1997:139-141).

Because my study was conducted in a culture lacking written documents, I had to rely on methods designed to investigate oral traditions. To that extent, I followed Helen Myers’ (1992:22) suggestion that ethnomusicologists must collect and document material from living informants. In other words, the researcher should be involved in some kind of fieldwork. In discussing “the field”, James Clifford (1997:21) says that “villages, inhabited by natives, are bounded sites particularly suitable for intensive visiting by anthropologists. They have long served as habitable, mappable centres for the community and, by extension, the culture”. In discussing “the field” from her own experience in musical culture of BaAka pygmies in Central African Republic, Michelle Kisiuk (1997:23-24) asked “who does or does not do the fieldwork, and why might we say so?” Furthermore, she stated that ethnographers use different tactics from, for example, those of travel writers or journalists to define who they are in “the field”.

In discussing different tactics used in fieldwork, in my case, I entered “my field” with “multiple roles” (also adopted by many other ethnomusicologists, but seldom comprehensively reported). By multiple roles in the field I mean acting as a passive observer, active observer or participant observer at different stages of fieldwork. Firstly, as a passive observer, I was sometimes “just watching” the flow of the observed phenomenon without interrupting. Secondly, as an active observer, I sometimes made a lot of inquiries about the phenomenon being observed. Lastly, as a participant observer, I also played an active role taking part in the phenomenon that was being observed, for example playing an instrument in the group that was being observed at a function. The choice of what kind of role that I should take in the field depended on the situation and the information that I needed to collect. For instance, if the performance or ritual that I observed was my first encounter with it, I preferred to act as a passive observer. In some passive observation, the performers or people who were involved in the music did not notice my existence as a researcher. I benefited from this role as the people who I observed will have acted naturally as in the real situation. People tend to act differently from their normal behaviour if they know that they are being observed. My task in this research is to report what is actually happening in the field. As Goffredo Plastino (2003:97-112) did in reporting about the behaviour of the drummers who perform during the Holy Week in Bajo Aragon, Spain, “telling the truth” is the key phrase in research that every researcher should aim for although some people might oppose this idea.

¹ This film was presented by John Baily at the symposium celebrating the work and legacy of John Blacking, Perth, Australia, 12-14 July 2003 and in his paper “Music in Afghanistan in the post- Taliban era” presented at International Centre for Music Studies, University of Newcastle, United Kingdom on 19 February 2004.

I chose to act as an active observer when I had to identify my appearance in the function as an academic researcher who was seeking the information about the phenomenon that was being observed and later going to write something about it. For example, in a practice session, my existence especially with the recording equipment attracted the attention not only of the players but also of the crowd. I had no choice but to identify myself as I had to get permission from the group before the recording took place or have a pre-recording discussion. Moreover, based on her own experience in doing fieldwork, Michelle Kisliuk (1997:27) suggests that in reflexive ethnography, “we get to know other people by making ourselves known to them, and through them to know ourselves again”. Apart from the recording materials, the benefit that I also gain from this role is that while it was still fresh in my mind I could immediately clarify anything that might have confused me during the function.

I take the role of participant observer normally in the third stage of my fieldwork. By the third stage I mean after I have been through the process of passive observation (first stage) and recording session (second stage) and have become familiar to my target group. I started to learn and perform on the instrument when I began to feel as if I had been “accepted” by the group that I observed. In my case, it did not take very long from the first stage before I felt “accepted” by the target group because of my citizenship as Malaysian who was very familiar with their customs. Though formally educated in western music, I also made myself become “bi-musical” by using participatory observation in the field. In discussing the concept of “bi-musicality”, Mantle Hood (1960:55) explained that the training of ears, eyes, hands and voice and the fluency gained in these skills promise a real intellectual capacity for theoretical studies. He was also concerned that training and performance in Western music hindered ethnomusicologists in studying other traditions. Hood not only argued the significance of becoming “bi-musical” but also suggested gaining cross-cultural musical understanding through performance.

Apart from that, there were many more advantages that I gained from my participant-observation approach in my study. As Kisliuk (1997:33) writes, “because of our participation in performance, ethnomusicologists are especially aware that there is much one can only know by doing”. Adding to this statement, Shelemay (1997:191) describes ethnomusicologists’ tendency to participate in music-culture as “truly participatory participant-observation”. In discussing the benefit gained from the participant-observation approach, one also might look into Paul Berliner’s work in Zimbabwe. Berliner (1993) used his skills in *mbira* playing to enter into the musical culture of Zimbabwe. Adding to this, Margaret Sarkissian (2000) also benefited from the participant-observation approach in getting to know “from the inside” the performing tradition of the Portuguese settlement in Malaka. To that extent, Michelle Kisliuk (1997:43) stated that “Field experience becomes worth writing about and reading as a result of full participation in the life of research. The challenge and opportunity of performance ethnography is to focus thoroughly on that aliveness”.

Conclusion

It appears that, the increasing of intercultural connections, people migration, and establishing borderless media flow offer many alternatives the Kelabit’s musical tradition. Consequently, contemporary musician tend to construct new identities as they move on in their careers, in winning their fan, exploiting the traditional elements and give new meaning to music. The Kelabit’s musical tradition and the issues related to this topic are changing along with the changes of the cultural practices. The sape playing for example, been described as a Kelabit traditional music is still looking forward for what will happen in the next generation. There is a question arose from this phenomena, just like *bangsawan* and *zapin* which were transformed from popular cosmopolitan musical genres into “traditional Malaysian performing arts”, will the sape playing still retain its traditional values and permanently placed in the category of “the Kelabit

traditional music”? or in contrary, will it transforms into popular cosmopolitan musical genre in the future? For now, it is difficult to answer this question unless someone will carry out a further study on this issue in future.

After all, based on the current situation, I can witness that there is sufficient evidence to show that the musical practices among the Kelabit people will change in the future. Either it will be accepted or not, they have to face this reality of the life. With the dynamic culture that the Kelabit people possess now, I wonder how their grandchildren will perceive of their musical tradition twenty years from now. Only if I can say, the ending of this study is not an ending of the investigation about the musical practices in the Kelabit society; instead, it is the beginning of the further studies for the next few issues related to their musical tradition.

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Brief Biography

Mohd Hassan ABDULLAH was educated at Kuala Terengganu Teachers Training College, where he received his Diploma in Primary School Education. He also received a Music Specialist Teacher Certificate from Kuala Lumpur Specialist Teachers Training College. Mohd Hassan then studied percussion with Dr. Cosmo Barbaro at Edinboro University of Pennsylvania and later continued his study with Prof. Michael D. Hanes at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, USA where he graduated with *Cum Laude* award. He then received his Master of Science (Music Education) from Universiti Putra Malaysia under the supervision of Dr. Minni Ang. Driven by deep interest in the Malay traditional music, he has undertaken field research of the kompang (frame drum) ensemble in West coast of Peninsular Malaysia for his Doctorate Degree under the supervision of Dr. Goffredo Plastino at University of Newcastle, United Kingdom.

Mohd Hassan Started his career as a music teacher at Sungai Behrang Primary School in Perak. He then appointed as a music lecturer at Kuala Terengganu Teachers Training College where he trained music teachers for primary school. Later, he was posted as a Head of Music Unit at Sultan Idris Teachers Training Institute in Perak. Since 1997, Mohd Hassan has been a lecturer at the Music Department of Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, where he teaches percussion, Music of Malaysia and Malay Drumming and Shadow Puppet. In March 2005, Mohd Hassan was appointed as Head of Music Department, Faculty of Arts and Music where he holds a major responsibility to move the department forward. He had holds an administrative post as a Dean, Faculty of Music and Performing Arts at Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Malaysia for six years. Mohd also performs on various instruments and ensembles of Malaysian Traditional Music. He had performed at various functions and venues domestically and internationally including in Bulgaria, Italy, England, Canada, China and Thailand.