

Advocating Contemporary Traditional Indigenous Semai Music through an Exploration of Youth Interest

Clare Suet Ching Chan

Department of Music and Music Education, Faculty of Music and Performing Arts,
Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Malaysia.

Zaharul Lailiddin Saidon

Department of Music and Music Education, Faculty of Music and Performing Arts,
Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Malaysia.

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Abstract

The traditional music of the Semai known as Sewang is losing its interest among the Orang Asli communities due to change in livelihood, religious conversion, and interest of youth in popular music and culture. This research aims to rejuvenate Semai musical heritage by exploring how the interest of the Semai youth in popular music can be integrated with traditional Sewang songs as an approach to musical sustainability. The objective of this research is to advocate the development of contemporary traditional Semai music by merging traditional elements into popular music styles. The new works will be performed and transcribed into a musical score, and recorded and produced as an online digital recording that has potential for commercialisation. This research will utilise an applied approach in which researchers act as advocates in nurturing a bottom-up development of contemporary traditional Semai songs. We argue that in order for Semai traditional music and songs to be sustainable, it needs to be relevant and of interest to the Semai youth. We hope to provide the Semai with creative ideas, musical and entrepreneurship skills to develop and produce their own contemporary traditional works in future.

Keywords: Contemporary Traditional, Jenulak, Indigenous Music, Orang Asli, Sewang

BACKGROUND

Sewang is the Malay term for an Orang Asli religious ritual that involves music, dance and singing. According to Edo (2006) different Orang Asli subgroups have different terms for this ceremony: the Semai of Perak refer to as the *kebut* (songs) and *asik* (dance); the Semai of Pahang, *jenulak* (songs) and *ngengsaak* (dance); the Temiar, *pehnooh* or *pehpoh* (dance) and *genabak* (songs) (p. 59). Sewang is performed to heal a patient's illness, to propitiate (request permission, renew agreement and thanksgiving) or to revitalize the spirit, and as a form of entertainment (p. 61). This research focuses on the traditional music of the indigenous Semai in Perak, which is gradually declining as the social-cultural life of the Semai evolves with the

modern world today (2016). The Semai in this region refer to sewang as 'jenulak', a music and dance genre that is performed to accompany festive celebrations or healing ceremonies among the Semai communities who live in small settlements along the foothills of the Titiwangsa Range of Perak and Pahang in peninsular Malaysia. The Semai are the largest subgroup of Orang Asli categorised under the Senoi group.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Some of the most significant contributions to the musical literature of the Orang Asli in Malaysia is Skeat and Blagden (1906), Schebesta [1973 (1928)], Evans (1968), Couillard et.al (1982), Roseman (1991), Chan (2012, 2015, 2016a, 2016b). Skeat and Blagden provides an overview of the musical cultures of many Orang Asli groups; Schebesta, on Negrito music; Couillard, on Jakun music; Roseman on Temiar music, Chan on Mah Meri, Semai and Jahai music respectively.

In the recent decades, Orang Asli groups such as RAMSAR, JELMOL, Seniro and Sarihan have formed several popular music bands. These popular music bands comprise of a bass guitarist, guitarist, drummer and others (Nicholas 2000, pp. 194-5). The Orang Asli perform their own song compositions such as "Joget Kapal Terbang" by Chen Y; "Seniroi" by Perenhod; "Aku Anak Kampung" by DJ Kamel & DJ Khaty; "Panas siang, Panas Malam" by Bah Bola, a Semai musical group from Gombak; and "Zaleha", "Rindu Menanti" and "Aku Budak Kampung" by the RAMSAR, a Semelai band from Pos Iskandar, Lake Bera, Pahang in popular music band styles. Orang Asli music bands exemplify influences from Thai, Hindustani, Indonesian, Malay and Western music. Rather than borrow musical styles from beyond the community, our research project intends to revive and consolidate jenulak musical influences with modern popular music styles.

In Malaysia, *Akar Umbi* is one of the most significant compact disc (CD) music recordings that synthesises contemporary music with traditional Temuan music. This music may be accessed online, an important feature in the preservation of traditional Temuan music. According to Antares (2002), Akar Umbi "helps to keep Mak Minah's memory alive through her beautiful songs, and encourage the younger generation of Orang Asli to cherish and value their traditional songs" (Barendregt, 2014, p. 360). Songs present in a modern setting and using instrument such as the keyboard, guitar and world music idiom helps the younger generation connect and engage with modernity (ibid.). The band combined professional musicians from the music industry with the Temuan musical group to create a 'world music' fusion type of music. The Akar Umbi CD consists of an "ethnically heterogeneous band of musicians that has self produced and widely distributed a record of 'world'/ Temuan protest music, focused on a woman's shaman's songs (Dentan 2001, pp. 9-10; Tan, 2002 as cited in Duncan 2008, p. 50)

While the Akar Umbi project marks a first attempt to create an Orang Asli 'world music' idiom, it was not Temuan culture bearers but Antares and his group of musicians who arranged and produced the music. While, this production is an important digitalised documentation of indigenous music, it does not sustain the production of traditional music among the Temuan communities. The adaptation of indigenous music to the world music idiom has sparked much controversy and critique in the academic world due to issues revolving around cultural

imperialism, authenticity and appropriation. Many perceive that indigenous music performed in the world music idiom is a “one way flow of products from West to the Rest” (Yue Lu, 2013, p. 50) that will eventually result in cultural “grey-out” (Nettl, 1983). Cultural “grey-out” posits fear that musical interaction and wider communication systems will lead to the standardisation music (Nettl, 1983, p.27). Wallis and Malm (1984, p. 10) propounds that the ‘world music’ idiom will allow a multitude of music cultures to continue to emerge and thrive (Ramnarine, 2003, p.197). Since, the discourse on world music composed for commercial and tourism purposes often positions indigenous music as having been appropriated by western music, we are kept aware of the tendency to impose our ideas on the Semai. This project will also be a self-reflective research in which we will explore a variety of advocacy skills, such as inspiring and cultivating community ownership of the new composed jenulak contemporary music.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Three phenomenon contribute to the change in musical production among the Semai 1) change of livelihood 2) religious conversion 3) interest of youth in popular music. Jenulak embody knowledge of the flora and fauna, and host of supernatural beliefs in their rainforest ecological niche. The change of livelihood from nomadic groups to permanent settlers have gradually detached the Semai from their forest ecology, consequently, their connection to jenulak. The younger generation finds it difficult to relate the meaning of the songs inherited from their ancestors, which encompasses the description of animals and plants, and a host of spirits from Semai ancestral animistic beliefs. One significant issue in learning jenulak is the need to grasp its unique singing style, song text rendition, and changing rhythmic patterns encultured through the oral transmission. Learning the art of singing and performing jenulak requires an internalisation of the music, which consists of unique modes, rhythmic patterns and improvisation. As many Semai *halaq* (shaman) and musicians seldom perform these songs today (2016), the continuity in the oral transmission of jenulak is disrupted. The Semai younger generation who are growing up in the habitus of modern popular music heard daily on the radio and television are inevitably more inclined to perform and produce music in these styles.

The conversion of many Semai groups into Christians and Muslims have also deterred them from singing jenulak due to its association with an animistic past. Semai Christians attend church and sing Christian hymns in the Malay language (Chan, 2012). Some of these religious sects discourage the Semai from performing jenulak because it is perceived to be “bringing the Orang Asli backward to a primitive animistic past” (personal communication, Jenita Engi, 9 July 2016). Christian hymns in Semai churches are usually sung in monophony and accompanied by a keyboard, guitar and bass. There appears to be little transference or adaption of traditional musical styles into Christian hymns. Islamised Semai groups are being encultured in Muslim forms of worship through *berzikir*, *berzanji*, and *nasyid*. Both religions prohibit the participation of singing, music and dancing associated with what these religions relegate to paganism.

Although the new converts are informed that they cannot perform jenulak, it is almost impossible to eliminate an ingrained cultural tradition among adult converts. Changes in music due to cultural contact is discussed by Nettl (2005) who posits that there are 9 different levels of change in the music when one culture encounters another – abandonment, impoverishment,

isolated preservation, diversification, consolidation, reintroduction, exaggeration, reintroduction, exaggeration, humorous juxtaposition and syncretism. Abandonment of some of the components of music could lead to 'improvement' or 'reduction' of music (p. 438). Isolated preservation could lead to the preservation of traditional musical heritage in "isolated pockets of existences, usually under the protection and patronage of the government agencies" (p.439). Since not everyone in the Semai community decides to convert, jenulak is still kept alive through festivals that continue to survive such as Jis Pai festival that celebrates the new year.

The third phenomenon that influences the Semai's musical performance is the Semai youth's selective rendition of local and international popular music from the region and beyond. The performances of popular local music by Semai music bands have gained popularity over jenulak performances during Semai festive celebrations. Popular live bands and karaoke singing thrive with popular demand among the Orang Asli communities regardless of age. The Semai are enthusiasts of Malay, Indonesian, Thai, Korean and Western popular music disseminated through the mass media (Chan, 2012). They memorise, imitate and perform their own live band version of these popular music at village festivals, celebrations and rites of passages. This phenomenon demonstrates the outcome of the Semai's exposure and engagement to modern musical styles through the media.

While local popular music is rising in popularity, jenulak has not altogether disappeared. There are still communities that practice traditional healing rituals accompanied by jenulak on a smaller and reduced scale. Traditional jenulak that accompanied healing ceremonies and rites of passages played an important function in ensuring the well being of the community. The commercialisation of the tourism industry provides an avenue for the performances of traditional jenulak songs. Semai grassroots groups are often invited to perform jenulak to local and international tourists or visiting dignitaries during tourism festivals such as the Rainforest World Music Festival (Sarawak), World Music Festival (Penang), Citrawarna (Tourism Malaysia), and the Selangor International Indigenous Arts Festival (Selangor). In response to the 'tourist gaze', these grassroots groups 'stage authenticity' (MacCannell, 1976) by creating an exoticised performance of their cultural heritage. They quench the thirst of the tourists' alienation or estrangement from their fruit of labour by performing a standardised version of jenulak. The staged jenulak is performed merely for the tourist spectacle by specific grassroots troupes that maintain exclusive control to the jenulak. It functions as a form of entertainment to the community and therefore the urgency for continuity of practice does not arise.

OBJECTIVE OF RESEARCH

To ensure that the function of performing jenulak continues to play a role in the livelihood and practices of the Semai communities, our research aims to develop new music that synergises traditional Semai music and songs into the 'world music' idiom that is relevant to the Semai youth. A new hybrid form referred to as contemporary traditional jenulak will be the outcome of this research project. We hypothesise that this music will be popular and of interest to the Semai community, therefore, ensuring the sustainability of the traditional jenulak in new ways.

This research capitalises on the current musical interest of the Semai youth and integrates them with the traditional Semai music in an attractive and aesthetically pleasing to the 21st

century audience. The aim of this research is to 1) advocate the development of contemporary traditional Semai music 2) perform, transcribe and record the contemporary traditional Semai music 3) produce a print and online digital recording of the contemporary traditional Semai music. We intend to advocate the composition of Semai contemporary music by nurturing the musical skills of the Semai youth and to facilitate them in creating their own modern arrangements of Semai contemporary music. Prior to this, we will facilitate jenulak singing and music workshops taught by the Semai musicians.

METHODOLOGY

This research utilizes action research that is cyclic, participative and reflective. The researchers will plan, act, observe, reflect; then, devised a plan for the new cycle (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988). The researchers respond to emerging situation – flexibility and openness to change and adaptation is important in action research. This research also engages in applied ethnomusicology, a relatively new approach to fieldwork involving advocacy and community engagement (Pettan, S., & Titon, J. T., 2015; Schippers, 2015; Harrison, 2012; Higgins, 2010; Stock, 2010; Titon, 2009). This research uses an applied ethnomusicology approach whereby researchers take on the role of advocators. The Semai youth talents chosen will be provided workshops to enhance their current musical skills, learn jenulak songs and approaches to composing hybrid contemporary traditional. During the course of the research, the researchers will reflect and re-evaluate their role as advocators. A large part of this research will involve examining the best approaches and practices in nurturing the musical potential of Semai youth. Since the approaches to advocacy in community engagement are a new area of study, this research will contribute to the developing field in applied Ethnomusicology.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This research project focuses on the sustainability and commercialisation potential of Semai music through the production of contemporary traditional Semai dance. It also analyses how music enhance well being and income generation among Semai youth. The three aims to be:

Sustainable

It will document traditional jenulak music and also the new contemporary traditional creative work developed from merging Semai youth's musical interest with traditional jenulak music. This new product is developed with an aim for commercialising musical heritage with integrity and in a form of aesthetic interest to the public. The commercialisation of indigenous musical heritage will highlight Malaysia on an international pedestal.

Commercialisation potential

In this research project, we explore how the Semai can bridge the gap between the musical interests of the younger generation with their communities' concern over their declining traditional cultural heritage. We will work together with some Semai youth from villages near the university to explore how their talents, interests and knowledge in music can be synergised with their traditional music in a new, fresh and creative way. The outcome will be an Semai traditional contemporary performance by the youth themselves.

Well being and income generation to the Semai

One of the most important 'Returns On Investment (ROI)' in this project is the aim to advocate the well being of the Semai society through musical training, skill development and entrepreneurship. We hope that this project will be a stepping-stone for Semai communities to advocate their own cultural heritage in a manner that fosters integrity and in-depth of knowledge in their own culture. We hope to provide a good model for the Semai communities to develop the sustainability of their own cultural heritage through creativity, skills development and entrepreneurship.

The research duration is for one year. The research design include the following step-by-step approaches:

1. Identifying Semai youth's musical interest (musical instruments, singing styles)
The researchers act as advocators and facilitators who identify the talent, interest and potential of the Semai children.
2. Audition and selecting Semai youth for musical project
Interested and talented candidates will be auditioned and a selection will be made on developing a Semai contemporary traditional musical group
3. Workshops on traditional jenulak songs
Workshops on learning traditional jenulak music and songs from the elders will be conducted. These candidates will learn to sing and perform traditional jenulak.
4. Examining elements of music in traditional jenulak
Researchers will assist in examining the musical elements of traditional jenulak
5. Workshop on enhancing skills of Semai youth musical interest
Researchers will provide some lessons on improving and shaping the musical skills of the Semai youth
6. Transferring traditional elements into Semai youth musical interest
We will encourage the candidates to experiment on how they can integrate traditional melodies and rhythms in to the musical instrument of their interest.
7. Revising, refining and polishing up performance
New contemporary indigenous Semai compositions will be revised and refined over a period time. It will be performed to the Semai communities for comment, critique and acknowledgement
8. Recording and digitalising the music
The approved musical works will be recorded and digitalised at the Faculty of Music and Performing Arts music studio
9. Transcribing final performance

The recorded music will be transcribed into a musical score for documentation and commercialisation

10. Editing article for journal

An article that discusses the strength and weakness of our approaches will be written. This article will also include feedback through interviews from the community on the processes and outcome of the project.

CONCLUSION

The findings to this research will be instrumental in sustaining the nation's national cultural heritage of indigenous music in a manner that is sustainable to the community. It supports the 'National Cultural Heritage Act 2005' and also the Ministry of Higher Learning (KPT) emphasis on 'Key Performance Index (KPI)' those marked by 'Key Intangible Product (KIP).' KIP research is immensely important in the development of the well being of the diverse communities in Malaysia. This research aims to foster the protection, preservation and sustainability of the national's nation cultural heritage in ways that benefit the communities well being.

This research also supports the Malaysian Education Blueprints 2015-2025 seventh (7th) trajectory that promotes an 'innovative ecosystem' for learning. The trajectory states that:

Malaysia needs to move from academia operating in insolation, to the quadruple helix of academia, industry, government, and local communities coming together in partnership for the incubation, development, and commercialisation of ideas.

The involvement of the academia with local communities toward improving Orang Asli well being reveals a shift from the top down to bottom up approach. It marks a landmark change in research whereby researchers act as advocators and facilitators toward improving the needs of the communities. This research project paves the way toward a practice-led fieldwork methodology in which researchers explore and continuous refine their role as advocators.

The identification and development of musical talents from the Orang Asli will contribute to the nation's development in the creative industry. Cultivating individuals or groups from different cultures will contribute to the diversity in musical performance and multicultural heritage of Malaysia. The sustainability of the rich musical heritage of the nation through transformation and creative innovation will highlight the nation's diverse identity and culture. This applied research will also help elevate the Orang Asli to national and global recognition and motivate them to capitalise on their musical heritage toward creative output. As stated in the *Dasar Industri Kreatif Negara (DIKN)*(National Creative Industry Policy):

... penggemblengan dan penghasilan kebolehan dan bakat individu atau berkumpulan berasaskan kreativiti, inovasi dan teknologi yang menjurus kepada sumber keberhasilan ekonomi dan pendapatan tinggi kepada negara dengan memberi penekanan kepada aspek karya dan hak cipta intelek selaras dengan budaya dan nilai-nilai murni kepelbagaian kaum di Malaysia.

... cultivating and producing individuals and groups based on creativity, innovation and technology based on creativity, innovation and technology that lead to high economic and high income sources for the country by emphasising the work of intellectuals and

intellectual property in line with the pure culture and values of racial diversity in Malaysia.

Developing talents and advocating the sustainability of musical cultures will contribute to the economic revenue of the nation through the tourism industry. The uniqueness of these diverse musical cultures is an asset that will provide us with a competitive edge, and at the same time catapult our country to an international and global pedestal.

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Corresponding Author

Associate Professor Dr. Clare Suet Ching Chan
Department of Music and Music Education
Faculty of Music and Performing Arts
Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris
Perak Malaysia
Email: clarechan23@gmail.com

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