

Traditional Melodies: Community Narratives, A Study of Terengganu Folk Songs

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DOI Link: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v15-i10/26767>

Published Date: 28 October 2025

Abstract

Community folk songs form a cornerstone of the oral literature and intangible heritage of the Malay community in Terengganu. Yet, the preservation of these traditional musical expressions has been threatened by the pressures of modernization and the erosion of communal traditions. This study seeks to document, preserve, and reinterpret Terengganu's folk songs as living cultural narratives within Malaysia's heritage framework. Employing a qualitative ethnographic design, data were obtained through interviews with key cultural informants and participant observation, and analysed using NVivo 12 software. The research systematically identifies and classifies the thematic patterns of these folk songs, highlighting their moral, cultural, and social functions in constructing community identity and sustaining collective memory. The findings indicate that Terengganu's folk songs encapsulate wisdom, values, and traditional worldviews that extend beyond entertainment. This study offers new insights into Malay oral traditions and provides a valuable foundation for cultural policy and heritage preservation initiatives.

Keywords: Folk songs, Oral literature, Ethnography, Terengganu, Malay culture, Intangible heritage, Cultural preservation

History

The folk songs of Terengganu represent a vital component of Malaysia's intangible cultural heritage, encompassing deep-rooted traditional values, historical narratives, and the cultural identity of the local community. In Malaysia, as in many other countries, folklore reflects traditional values and the country's history (sometimes referred to as "the people's story"). Terengganu folk songs date back to pre-Islamic times and have been documented in Malaysian literature since the 19th century. Along with scribed songs, they are included in

polite society, harvest rituals, prayer gatherings, and other social events and rituals that accompany feasts, weddings, and harvest celebrations.

As Nor (2023) notes, folk songs are not purely entertainment; they educate society informally by conveying wise counsel or critique without directly stating them. One of the most famous Terengganu folk songs is *Ulik Mayang*. Its history can be traced back to ancient healing songs, known as "*pantun*," offered to sea spirits for blessings and safeguarding. Animistic beliefs among fishermen living along the coast form the basis for such rituals. While these songs are usually written in a local dialect, they are arranged into simple yet vivid emotional appeals, nurtured and ingrained with affection towards the area's ethnic roots. Accompanied by traditional Terengganu musical instruments such as the gong, flute, rebana (a type of frame drum), and drum, the songs embody the unparalleled beauty of the music and dance of the region, making them unique.

To address the challenges of modernisation, government entities, educational institutions, and cultural organisations have made considerable efforts to conserve and revive these musical traditions. The goal of these measures is to protect the sociocultural adaptability of folk songs as dynamic cultural symbols in Malaysia.

Objectives and Research Site

Folk songs represent a vital form of musical expression, deeply rooted in a community's culture, history, and collective memory. Passed down orally from one generation to another, they encapsulate daily activities, belief systems, traditional practices, and local legends, thereby preserving the identity and shared experiences of the people. However, modernisation and changing lifestyles have gradually diminished the appreciation and transmission of these traditional songs, leading to a loss of cultural continuity within local communities.

The motivation for this study arises from the observed decline in the recognition of Terengganu's folk songs, which once served as vital instruments of moral education, storytelling, and community identity. In light of rapid modernisation and cultural homogenization, this research seeks to document, analyse, and interpret the thematic richness of Terengganu's folk songs before they fade into obscurity. Focusing on the Kuala Terengganu district, renowned for its wealth of oral traditions, folklore, and cultural scholars that study about exploring the thematic structures embodied in these songs. It contributes to the field by offering a comprehensive thematic analysis that not only preserves local oral traditions but also provides insights into the values, beliefs, and worldviews embedded in Malay folk literature.

Problem Statement

Folk songs from Terengganu have significantly declined in popularity and no longer hold a central place in the community's culture. Instead, these songs are now reserved only for certain occasions, such as cultural festivals, artistic showcases, and formal state functions. While certain songs and pieces are occasionally broadcast on Radio Klasik or on some regional stations in Terengganu, these performances are both rare and insufficient to sustain public interest. This reduced focus indicates little appreciation for the folk music of Terengganu, especially among the youth. Among the factors contributing to this are the rapid shift to

modern music, which is deemed more relatable and engaging, and the lack of systematic promotion through sustained initiatives to document traditional music. These folk songs risk fading into obscurity without active preservation. Musical compositions such as folk songs are critical in the development of cultural identity, but these increasingly diminishing values are succumbing to the impacts of modernisation. The shift in cultural and societal preferences to contemporary ones has transformed at an alarming pace (Kamaruddin, 2020).

Equally important, a significant contributing factor to the decline of folk song traditions in contemporary society has been the overwhelming influence of mass media. The lack of media literacy and digital participation among local cultural practitioners compounds this challenge. Many of them are unfamiliar with social media and digital platforms for content creation and dissemination, which now form the foundation of artistic communication and exposure. Furthermore, traditional artists who possess such knowledge often hesitate to share their work publicly, both offline and online, due to concerns about plagiarism and the devaluation of their creative ideas. As Fatin (2015) observed, the youth's preference for R&B, hip-hop, and K-pop reflects a growing inclination toward globalised cultural expressions, signalling a shift in music consumption patterns. Consequently, traditional content regarded as cultural heritage is being pushed to the margins, as highlighted by Kamaruddin (2020), who notes that many cultural practitioners struggle to adapt to modern media technologies.

In light of these issues, this study is motivated by the urgent need to preserve and revitalise Terengganu's folk songs, which are at risk of disappearing from public consciousness. By examining their thematic richness and cultural meanings, this research contributes to the documentation and appreciation of Malay oral heritage, while emphasising the continued relevance of traditional art forms in a rapidly modernising media landscape.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design, using an ethnographic approach, to conduct fieldwork in Kuala Terengganu. Data collection was conducted through direct interaction with the eight selected informants, chosen for their knowledge and experience on the topic. A composer of folk songs served as one of the informants and was chosen as the primary informant due to his extensive involvement in local folk music. The researcher utilised two methods to obtain empirical data: participant observation and semi-structured interviews. As the primary method of data collection, participant observation enabled the researcher to live within the community and interact with informants over a significant period. The researcher was able to participate in and observe relevant practices and social interactions, which afforded them deep insight into the overarching themes of Terengganu's folk songs. Moreover, data obtained from the interviews and participant observation was cross-verified with existing materials regarding folk music. The data obtained was processed with NVivo Plus software, which enabled transcription, data capture, organisation, classification, coding, analysis, and verification of results in an orderly manner. This approach ensured the research was authentic and accurate while depicting the oral storytelling traditions of Terengganu in rich detail.

Table 1

Number of Informants

No.	Informant ID	Category	Gender	Age	Occupation
1.	IRU 1	Song Composer	Male	71	Retired Government Servant
2.	IRU 2	Song Lyricist	Male	85	Retired Government Servant
3.	IRU 3	Cultural Artist	Male	51	JKKN Officer
4.	IRU 4	Song Composer	Male	36	Director PKW UniSZA
5.	IRU 5	Folk Song Singer	Female	79	Retired Government
6.	IR 6	Local Resident	Female	30	Factory Worker
7.	IR 7	Local Resident	Male	26	Student
8.	IR 8	Local Resident	Female	25	Student

(Sources: Fieldwork data, 2025)



Figure 1. Interview session with the Primary Informant

(Source: Fieldwork, 2024)

Findings and Discussion

The results of this study indicate that there are several thematic categories in the folk songs of Terengganu. These include cultural customs, affection and romance, ritualistic invocation and shamanism, moral teachings and advice. The thematic analysis consists of the content and structure of folk songs sung by children, adults, and the elderly, as well as those performed by shamans or traditional healers (bomoh or pawang). Attempts to study these themes show that Terengganu folk songs can be classified as classical Malay poetry, serving the purpose of artistic and cultural expression for the people. This classification of themes

was derived from data collected through participant observation, ethnographic interviews, and document review on traditional songs.

Theme 1: Cultural Customs

According to Fizaowen (2012), adat (custom) refers to a collection of practices accepted within a society. Custom inscription on documents is also referred to as *cad istiadat*, which covers the ceremonial practices associated with various human activities from birth to death. Cultural customs captured in folk music are reflected in these songs, which function as a mirror of society's culture and national identity. This is consistent with the ideas of French Structuralism theory, which maintains that cultural documents like folk songs embed the structural reasoning and perspective of a particular society in their repetitive symbols.

Zapin Bukit Losong Folk Song

The Zapin Bukit Losong folk song was composed to commemorate remarkable places associated with Losong's ethnic group, which was culture-driven, and so its folk songs depict cultural practices. Bukit Losong is well known as one of the major tourist centres in the state of Terengganu. Informant IRU 1 has indicated that this region hosts the Terengganu State Museum, one of the largest in Malaysia, which is proactive in nurturing archaeological collections and the region's cultural traditions. The song Zapin Bukit Losong features lyrics that highlight the place's historical features and its varying status; some areas have seen better days, while others have suffered from a lack of attention and care. The Bukit song Zapinis of poetic form to preserve cultural identity, adding, and maintaining social group heritage among locals.

"Pokli cipta lagu ni sebab nok citer tempat menarik lah kat ganu ni. Doh bila pokli tengok semua tempat ada doh lagu, tapi losong adok. Pokli pun rasa nok wak lagu ni op. sebab kita suka bagi orang dengar lagu tentang tempat kita."

(IRU 1)

*"Bukit Losong teguh berdiri,
Sama bertentang Pulau Sekati,
Tersergam indah Muzium Negeri,
Martabat himpunan warisan terpatni.
Muzium bangga rakyat negeri,
Warisan dijaga penuh teliti,
Khazanah berharga nilainya tinggi,
Nilai dimata timbangan hati."*

*Losong feri waktunya dulu,
Nadi penghubung laluan beralu,
Sejarah dulu ditelan waktu
Terpahatlah sudah laksana tugu.
Sejarah dulu ditelan waktu
Terpahatlah sudah laksana tugu."*

(IRU 1)

Folk Song of Inang Rodat

Inang Rodat is a folk song based on the Rodat musical form. This composition is intended to promote Rodat as a cultural heritage performance in Terengganu, as well as to

market some of the state's attractions. The study's findings suggest that the lyricist intended Inang Rodat to promote the traditional Rodat performance and to make it more accessible to broader audiences by situating it in the context of Pulau Kapas and other notable sites. Also, Inang Rodat incorporates elements of the original Rodat song, such as Arabic and Persian fragments, which adds to its cultural and religious depth. The adaptation strikes a balance between preserving traditional rod song traits and promoting culture through popular music.

"Lagu Inang Rodat ni cikgu wak sebab masetu nok wak persembahan di Kuala Lumpur. Pahtu mase tu adok orang bulek nok wak persembahan Rodat. Sebab tu cikgu cipta lagu Inang Rodat ni. Lagu dia mudoh sikik lah orang nok nyanyi nya tu"

(IRU 2)

*"Dari Penarik,
Dari Penarik ke Kuala Setiu,
Hendak mencari,
Hendak mencari nasilah dagang
Hai sungguh menarik, sungguh menarik,
Sungguh menarik rodan Melayu,
Hai inilah Rodan Melayu,
Inilah Rodan kami sembahkan.*

*Ya hayo muya lana kayo,
Muya haye kolo lah betaya
Le asale ala lade ama
Di duniwa niwa la dunia*

*Pulau Lah Kapah
Pula lah kapah pula di laut
Same lah tetang
Same lah tetang Kuale Marang*

*Hai layor dipapah,
Layor dipapah kemudi dipaut,
Hai macam lah bunge,
Macang lah bunge kembang di karang."*

(IRU 2)

Theme 2: Affection and Romantic Love

Affection, as defined, is manifest in every single life form and does not solely pertain to human beings, but rather encompasses animals and plants as well (Sereenevasan, 2015). It is evident that human emotion gives rise to feelings and serves as the fundamental basis for interpersonal bonds between humans and animals, and even between humanity and nature. As stated by Siti Norlina (2004), affection is vital towards attaining a balanced society.

In Islam, compassion and love are enforced as core moral values. Their absence in day-to-day life means one has not completely absorbed fully practicing the religion. Thus,

affection in this case is not only a feeling but rather a social and a moral obligation that serves as the base for collective societal life, character, behavior, actions, and relations.

Ngajuk Hati Folk Song

The topic of love also appears in the folk song *Ngajuk Hati*, which delves into deeper issues such as falling in love and being emotionally let down. This song tells of a woman's grief over the promises her lover made and how she feels let down by his failure to fulfil them. In the first stanza, she not only wonders whether his vows were truthful but also laments his failure to honour them. *Ngajuk Hati* enables listeners to appreciate the complexities of romantic affairs, which involve pain, emotional fragility, and, particularly, betrayal. The song captures a particular form of emotional articulation characteristic of the Malay folk tradition, in which personal feelings are often expressed through poetry and music. It thus serves as a cultural document that reveals the relational dynamics and emotional realities of people's lives in the past.

*"Lagu ngajuk hati ni pokli cipta sebab duk tengok orang berkaseh
sesame pasangan. Ada tu duk merajuk dengan pasangan da
nada pulak hok yang dok jadi bercinta. Putus pulop tengoh
jalan."*

(IRU 1)

*"Lautan api, lautan api akan direnangi,
Setinggi gunung, setinggi gunung akan didaki
Ah guane lah sumpah, guane lah sumpah janji,
Senangnya janji, senangnya janji tidak tepati."*

*Airlah mata, airlah mata, bertemankan diri,
Derah berlinang, derah berlinang, leleh dipipi,
Bakpelah malang, bakpe malang, kasih dok jadi.
Semacam pantai, macamlah pantai, tidok bertepi.
Hilang din mata hilang jugo di hati, seru mampu tidok ingat lagui*

*Dulu berjanji langit menjadi saksi
Lening lupa diri merajok hati,
Mana sumpahnya mana syumpah tu mana janji mu
Manihnya bibir manihnya lidoh tidak bertulang
Ku tergolek lesu, tergolek lesu, tidok menentu
Timbul tenggelam, timbul tenggelam, ke tasik kerinduan."*

(IRU 1)

Main Teri Folk Song

Main Teri, or Main Puteri, is a practice in both Kelantan and Terengganu that combines both music therapy and traditional folk therapy. Described by Hussin (n.d.), Puteri is more than just a song, as it encompasses musical expression, symbolic actions, and deeper cultural meanings, all serving therapeutic purposes within the Malay context. As shared by informant IRU 3, it was Main Puteri who treated the sick, both physically and emotionally, and that treatment was considered the central function of this ritual. Many members of contemporary society use modern medicine, but in some circles, ritualistic healing is still practised. It is

concealed in modern society for the most part due to reluctance to embrace the supernatural aspects of spirit calling. The concern of misrepresentation, especially from the Islamic perspective, which condemns shaman and animistic-type practices, creates further barriers to these vanishing methods.

*“Ore lain sega mega,
Jatoh ko nik kurus kering,
Sakit tak segar deme tak kebah,
Mandi tak basah selimut tak lindung,
Make tak kenyang,
Kalu sungguh nik nak tanggung,
Baka ayah zuriat mak bonda,
Nik baka baik,
Nik tanggung biar baik.”*

(IRU 3)

Primitive people created folk songs revolving around shamanistic ideas and ritual invocation as part of their self-healing techniques. Such practices have come under contestation and are increasingly marginalised due to their link with khurafat (Islamic superstitious beliefs), which are defined as heretical in Islam. The use of any causative and intermediaries who are beyond Allah is strictly forbidden in Islam (Mohd Kamel, Muhammad Firdaus, & Mohd Asyran, 2021). These songs need to be recognised as cultural property and safeguarded. This is not to say that they should be regarded as an endorsement for the practices but rather as an authentic document of the thought worldview, spiritual systems, and customs of the past. Preservation and interdisciplinary research of this nature enable modern society to appreciate the socio-cultural and traditional knowledge systems of bygone Malay societies.

Theme 3: Moral Advice and Instruction

In traditional Malay society, folk songs served to convey moral issues and offer advice. In this way, members of folk societies offered guidance or gentle criticism through songs. Counsel delivered this way was often better accepted. This practice indicates that folk songs having ethics and moral instruction elements were an essential part of a community's oral tradition. Such songs reinforced lessons learned in daily life. Their existence today demonstrates the value of these folk songs as cultural heritage, as well as their role in shaping social customs and guiding heritage among the youth.

Anak Itik Tok Wi Folk Song

Anak Itik Tok Wi, a folk song by Cikgu Zamani Taha, is didactic in that it offers moral advice. The central theme of the song focuses on discipline, manners (adab), and ethics — ethical behaviour in any given situation. The song reinforces social etiquette and also mentions Ubat Limau Lelam (a traditional herbal remedy), thereby embedding health wisdom within cultural expression while emphasising sincerity and loyalty. The romantic relationships are approached with unconditional acceptance while encouraging emotional maturity and respect. The lyrics emphasise avoiding misunderstandings in daily interactions by stressing the use of clear, concise language. Despite its encompassing moral attributes, Anak Itik Tok

Wi is still preserved and sung as an educational tool to address the social and ethical issues confronting youth today.

*"Anak Itik Tok Wi,
Mandi Dalam Kolam,
Buat Apa Tok Wi,
Ubat Limau Lelam,*

*Sakit Apa Tok Wi?,
Sakit Sendi Tulang,
Ubat Apa Tok Wi,
Ubat Sengal Tulang.*

*Dalam Paya Orang Berakit,
Buluh Layu Patah Sebatang,
Dalam Dada Terasa Sakit,
Sakit Rindu Abang Seorang.*

*Letak Dulang Berhias Tepi,
Bunga Perca Rebah Bertindih,
Dengar Abang Adik Menyanyi,
Lagu Resah Orang Berkasih.*

*Harap-Harap Tumbuhnya Padi,
Tapi Lalang Tumbuh Sebandang,
Harap-Harap Kasih Menjadi,
Sampai Masa Tinggal Seorang.*

*Kalau Padi Katakan Padi,
Jangan Hampa Tertampi-Tampi,
Kalau Sudi Katakan Sudi,
Jangan Kita Ternanti-Nanti."*

(IRU 2)

Conclusion

The results of this study show that every folk song originating in Terengganu is laden with invaluable lessons and moral undertones that can benefit society. As long as people compose and sing these songs, there is the possibility of recording and studying their values. With proper interpretation and publication, these songs can be appreciated and embraced by the younger generation, thus making them relevant in contemporary society. This research provides a holistic view of the thematic aspects of folk songs from the region of Terengganu. The decision to choose Terengganu as the area of study was reasonable as it sought to investigate the folk culture and how it is captured in local songs. The region's rich oral heritage and community experiences provided useful material for developing themes.

The results of this research will add to the existing literature on oral narratives, especially in the field of Malay folk music. This research contributes to the preservation and understanding of Malaysia's intangible cultural heritage by revealing the thematic diversity and socio-cultural significance of Terengganu's folk songs. This study enhances the

understanding and appreciation of such traditional practices and, therefore, emphasises the need to conserve intangible cultural heritage as an integral part of Malaysia's identity and socio-cultural development.

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