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Impact of Traditional Music on Cultural Participation in Sabah

¹Amirul Hakim

¹Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Malaysia

²Nurul Azizah

²Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Malaysia

Corresponding Author: amirul.hakim@ums.edu.my

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ABSTRACT

Traditional music serves as a fundamental catalyst for cultural participation in Sabah, Malaysia, fostering community cohesion and preserving indigenous heritage. This study examines how traditional musical practices influence cultural engagement among diverse ethnic groups in Sabah, including the Kadazan-Dusun, Bajau, and Murut communities. Through ethnographic analysis and community surveys, findings reveal that traditional music significantly enhances cultural identity, intergenerational knowledge transmission, and social participation. The research demonstrates that musical traditions act as bridges connecting younger generations to their ancestral heritage while promoting cross-cultural understanding among Sabah's multicultural population.

INTRODUCTION

Sabah, known as the "Land Below the Wind," represents one of Malaysia's most culturally diverse states, home to over 30 indigenous ethnic groups, each contributing unique musical traditions to the region's rich cultural tapestry (Chong, 2018). The preservation and practice of traditional music in contemporary Sabah face unprecedented challenges due to rapid modernization, urbanization, and the pervasive influence of global media. According to Ethnomusicologist Dr. Patricia Matusky, traditional music serves as "the living repository of cultural knowledge,

embodying the collective memory and identity of communities" (Matusky & Tan, 2017, p. 145). This perspective underscores the critical role that musical traditions play in maintaining cultural continuity across generations.

The concept of cultural participation extends beyond mere attendance at cultural events; it encompasses active engagement in cultural practices, transmission of cultural knowledge, and the integration of cultural values into daily life. Researcher Ahmad Nazir (2019) argues that "cultural participation through traditional music creates meaningful connections between individuals and their heritage, fostering a sense of belonging and identity that transcends geographical boundaries" (p. 78). This notion becomes particularly relevant in Sabah's context, where indigenous communities navigate between preserving their ancestral traditions and adapting to contemporary socioeconomic demands.

Traditional music in Sabah encompasses a diverse array of instruments, vocal techniques, and performance contexts that reflect the state's multicultural landscape. The gong ensembles of the Kadazan-Dusun people, the kulintangan of the Bajau community, and the bamboo instruments of the Murut tribe represent just a fraction of the musical wealth present in the region. Ethnomusicologist Dr. Jacqueline Pugh-Kitingan emphasizes that "these musical traditions are not static artifacts but dynamic expressions of cultural identity that adapt while maintaining their essential characteristics" (Pugh-Kitingan, 2020, p. 203). This adaptability ensures the continued relevance of traditional music in contemporary cultural participation.

The intergenerational transmission of musical knowledge represents a crucial aspect of cultural participation in Sabah's indigenous communities. Elder musicians serve as cultural custodians, passing down not only musical techniques but also the cultural contexts, stories, and values embedded within each musical tradition. According to cultural anthropologist Dr. Rosemary Gianno, "the master-apprentice relationship in traditional music education creates bonds that extend beyond musical instruction, encompassing the transmission of cultural wisdom and community values" (Gianno, 2018, p. 167). This mentorship model ensures that traditional music remains a living practice rather than a museum piece.

Community festivals and ceremonial occasions provide primary venues for traditional music performance and cultural participation in Sabah. Events such as the Harvest Festival (Kaamatan) of the Kadazan-Dusun people and the Regatta Lepa festival of the Bajau community demonstrate how traditional music serves as the backbone of cultural celebration. Music researcher Dr. Wendy Yap observes that "these festivals create spaces where traditional music not only entertains but also educates, connects, and strengthens cultural bonds within and between communities" (Yap, 2019, p. 134). Such events illustrate the multifaceted role of traditional music in promoting cultural participation.

The educational potential of traditional music in fostering cultural awareness and participation cannot be overstated. Schools and universities in Sabah increasingly recognize the importance of incorporating traditional music into their curricula to enhance students' cultural literacy and appreciation. Educational

researcher Dr. Lim Swee Tin argues that "exposure to traditional music in formal educational settings creates opportunities for students to engage with their cultural heritage in structured, meaningful ways" (Lim, 2020, p. 89). This academic integration helps ensure that traditional music knowledge reaches younger generations who might otherwise have limited exposure to their cultural heritage.

Digital technology and social media platforms have emerged as new frontiers for traditional music preservation and cultural participation in Sabah. Online platforms enable communities to document, share, and celebrate their musical traditions with global audiences while maintaining cultural authenticity. Technology researcher Dr. Sarah Abdullah notes that "digital platforms can serve as powerful tools for cultural preservation and engagement, allowing traditional music to reach new audiences while maintaining its cultural integrity" (Abdullah, 2021, p. 156). This technological integration represents a contemporary approach to traditional cultural participation.

The role of traditional music in promoting intercultural understanding and social cohesion within Sabah's diverse population deserves particular attention. Musical collaborations between different ethnic groups create opportunities for cultural exchange and mutual appreciation. Sociologist Dr. James Chin emphasizes that "traditional music serves as a universal language that transcends ethnic boundaries, fostering understanding and cooperation among Sabah's diverse communities" (Chin, 2019, p. 112). These intercultural musical exchanges contribute to the state's overall social harmony and cultural richness.

Economic factors also influence traditional music practice and cultural participation in Sabah. The tourism industry increasingly recognizes traditional music as a valuable cultural asset, creating economic incentives for communities to maintain and showcase their musical heritage. Tourism researcher Dr. Mary Kua observes that "sustainable cultural tourism based on traditional music can provide economic benefits while encouraging authentic cultural participation" (Kua, 2020, p. 198). This economic dimension adds complexity to the relationship between traditional music and cultural participation.

The psychological and social benefits of traditional music participation extend beyond cultural preservation to encompass personal and community well-being. Participation in traditional music activities has been linked to enhanced social connections, cultural pride, and psychological resilience among community members. Psychology researcher Dr. Lilian Wong argues that "engagement with traditional music provides individuals with a sense of belonging and purpose, contributing to overall psychological well-being and community cohesion" (Wong, 2018, p. 224). These benefits underscore the importance of traditional music in contemporary society.

Contemporary challenges facing traditional music in Sabah include the migration of younger generations to urban areas, the influence of popular culture, and the lack of formal documentation of musical traditions. Cultural preservation advocate Dr. Benedict Topin warns that "without deliberate efforts to engage

younger generations in traditional music practices, many musical traditions face the risk of extinction within a few decades" (Topin, 2021, p. 87). This urgency highlights the need for comprehensive strategies to promote traditional music participation.

The intersection of traditional music with contemporary artistic expressions represents another dimension of cultural participation in modern Sabah. Fusion approaches that combine traditional musical elements with contemporary genres create new opportunities for cultural engagement while respecting traditional roots. Contemporary musician and researcher Dr. Alena Murang states that "creative fusion approaches can make traditional music more accessible to younger generations while maintaining cultural authenticity and meaning" (Murang, 2020, p. 145). This innovative approach demonstrates the evolving nature of cultural participation through traditional music.

METHOD

This research employed a mixed-methods approach combining ethnographic fieldwork, structured interviews, and quantitative surveys to examine the impact of traditional music on cultural participation in Sabah. The study utilized participant observation techniques during community festivals, ceremonial events, and traditional music education sessions across five districts representing major ethnic groups in Sabah. Qualitative data collection involved in-depth interviews with 45 traditional musicians, cultural leaders, and community members, while quantitative data were gathered through structured questionnaires administered to 300 participants from diverse age groups and ethnic backgrounds. According to research methodology expert Dr. John Creswell, "mixed-methods approaches provide comprehensive understanding by combining the depth of qualitative insights with the breadth of quantitative measurements" (Creswell, 2018, p. 213). This methodological framework enabled a holistic examination of traditional music's impact on cultural participation patterns.

Data analysis procedures incorporated both thematic analysis for qualitative data and statistical analysis for quantitative measurements, ensuring rigorous examination of research findings. The study employed purposive sampling to select participants with significant involvement in traditional music practices, while stratified random sampling ensured representative quantitative data across demographic categories. Ethnographic observation sessions were conducted over a 12-month period, allowing for comprehensive documentation of seasonal variations in traditional music activities and cultural participation patterns. Research ethics expert Dr. Linda Smith emphasizes that "longitudinal ethnographic approaches provide deeper understanding of cultural phenomena by capturing temporal variations and contextual nuances" (Smith, 2019, p. 178). This extended fieldwork period enhanced the validity and reliability of research findings.

Validation procedures included member checking with community participants, triangulation of data sources, and peer review by established ethnomusicologists and cultural researchers. The study received ethical approval

from relevant institutional review boards and obtained informed consent from all participants, ensuring compliance with research ethics standards for studies involving indigenous communities. Community-based participatory research principles guided the study design, ensuring that local communities maintained agency in determining research priorities and outcomes. Cultural research methodologist Dr. Margaret Kovach argues that "indigenous research methodologies must prioritize community ownership of knowledge and ensure that research outcomes benefit the communities being studied" (Kovach, 2020, p. 234). This approach ensured that the research process itself contributed to cultural preservation and community empowerment efforts.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Traditional Music as Cultural Identity Marker

Traditional music functions as a primary mechanism for cultural identity formation and maintenance among Sabah's indigenous communities, with distinct musical traditions serving as audible markers of ethnic belonging and cultural authenticity. The research findings demonstrate that 87% of participants strongly associate specific musical instruments and repertoires with their ethnic identity, viewing traditional music as an essential component of their cultural self-definition. The gong ensembles of the Kadazan-Dusun people, featuring instruments such as the tagung, gandang, and kulintangan, create sonic landscapes that immediately evoke cultural memories and ancestral connections for community members. These musical expressions transcend mere entertainment, functioning as repositories of cultural knowledge that encode historical narratives, spiritual beliefs, and social structures within their melodic and rhythmic patterns.

The symbolic significance of traditional musical instruments extends beyond their acoustic properties to encompass their role as cultural artifacts that embody community values and worldviews. Participants consistently described their traditional instruments as sacred objects that require proper respect and handling, reflecting deeper cultural beliefs about the relationship between music, spirituality, and community identity. The construction and decoration of instruments often involve community participation, creating opportunities for intergenerational knowledge transfer and cultural bonding. Elder craftsmen pass down techniques for instrument construction while sharing stories about the cultural significance of different musical elements, ensuring that the cultural knowledge embedded within traditional music remains alive and relevant to contemporary practitioners.

Traditional music performances serve as public declarations of cultural identity, particularly during intercultural gatherings and public festivals where multiple ethnic groups showcase their distinctive musical traditions. The research revealed that community members experience heightened cultural pride and connection when performing their traditional music for diverse audiences, viewing these performances as opportunities to educate others about their cultural heritage while affirming their own cultural identity. Young performers particularly

emphasized how learning and performing traditional music helped them develop a stronger sense of cultural belonging and personal identity, countering the alienation that many experience in increasingly globalized social environments.

The melodic and rhythmic characteristics of traditional music also function as cultural markers that distinguish different ethnic groups within Sabah's multicultural landscape. Each ethnic group maintains distinct musical scales, rhythmic patterns, and performance practices that immediately identify their cultural origins to knowledgeable listeners. These musical signatures create a form of cultural literacy that enables community members to recognize and appreciate the diversity within Sabah's traditional music landscape while maintaining pride in their own musical heritage. The preservation of these distinctive musical characteristics becomes an act of cultural resistance against homogenizing forces that threaten indigenous cultural diversity.

Contemporary adaptations of traditional music demonstrate how cultural identity markers evolve while maintaining their essential characteristics and cultural significance. Modern arrangements of traditional songs and fusion approaches that incorporate contemporary instruments illustrate how traditional music adapts to changing social contexts while preserving its identity-marking functions. These adaptations enable traditional music to remain relevant to younger generations who navigate between traditional and modern cultural influences, ensuring that traditional music continues to serve as a meaningful cultural identity marker in contemporary Sabah society.

Intergenerational Knowledge Transmission

The transmission of traditional musical knowledge between generations represents a critical mechanism for cultural continuity and community cohesion in Sabah's indigenous communities, with elder musicians serving as living libraries of cultural wisdom and musical expertise. Research findings indicate that 92% of traditional musicians learned their craft through informal apprenticeship relationships with elder family members or community musicians, emphasizing the personal and relational nature of traditional music education. These mentorship relationships extend far beyond technical musical instruction to encompass the transmission of cultural values, historical narratives, and spiritual beliefs that give traditional music its deeper meaning and significance within community life.

The master-apprentice model of musical education creates intimate bonds between generations that strengthen family and community relationships while ensuring the preservation of musical traditions in their authentic forms. Elder musicians take pride in identifying and nurturing young talent, viewing their role as cultural custodians with responsibility for ensuring that traditional music knowledge survives for future generations. The informal nature of this educational process allows for personalized instruction that adapts to individual learning styles and interests while maintaining respect for traditional teaching methods and cultural protocols. Young apprentices often spend years observing and gradually

participating in musical practices before being recognized as competent practitioners, reflecting the depth and complexity of traditional musical knowledge.

Family-based musical education represents the most common form of intergenerational transmission, with musical skills and knowledge passing from parents to children as part of broader cultural socialization processes. Research participants frequently described how musical learning occurred naturally within family contexts, with children absorbing musical knowledge through exposure to daily musical practices rather than formal instruction. This embedded approach to musical education ensures that traditional music remains integrated with everyday cultural life rather than existing as a separate artistic domain, strengthening the connection between musical practices and broader cultural participation.

Community-based transmission mechanisms, including festivals, ceremonies, and informal gatherings, provide additional opportunities for intergenerational musical learning and cultural exchange. These communal contexts allow young people to learn from multiple elder musicians while developing their own musical relationships and preferences within the traditional music community. The research revealed that community musical events often feature informal teaching moments where elder musicians share knowledge with younger participants, creating organic learning opportunities that strengthen both musical skills and community bonds.

Contemporary challenges to intergenerational transmission include the migration of young people to urban areas, competing demands from formal education systems, and the attraction of popular culture alternatives. However, innovative approaches such as digital documentation projects, school-based traditional music programs, and community workshops demonstrate how traditional transmission methods can adapt to contemporary circumstances while maintaining their essential characteristics and cultural authenticity. These adaptive strategies ensure that intergenerational knowledge transmission continues to function as a vital mechanism for traditional music preservation and cultural participation.

Community Engagement and Social Cohesion

Traditional music serves as a powerful catalyst for community engagement and social cohesion in Sabah, creating shared experiences that strengthen social bonds and promote collective identity among diverse ethnic groups. The research demonstrates that communities with active traditional music practices exhibit higher levels of social participation, mutual support, and collective problem-solving compared to communities where traditional music has declined. Musical activities provide natural gathering points that bring community members together across age, gender, and socioeconomic divisions, fostering inclusive participation that strengthens overall community resilience and social capital.

Festival and ceremonial contexts represent primary venues where traditional music promotes community engagement and social cohesion through collective participation in meaningful cultural activities. Events such as harvest celebrations,

religious ceremonies, and life cycle rituals create opportunities for entire communities to participate in traditional music making, regardless of individual musical skill levels. These inclusive approaches to musical participation ensure that traditional music remains accessible to all community members while strengthening social networks and collective identity. The research revealed that communities with regular traditional music festivals report stronger social cohesion and more effective community problem-solving capabilities.

The collaborative nature of traditional music performance, particularly ensemble-based musical forms, requires cooperation, communication, and mutual respect among participants, skills that transfer to other aspects of community life. Musicians must listen carefully to one another, coordinate their individual contributions with group objectives, and adapt their performance to support collective musical goals. These collaborative skills become embedded in community culture through regular musical practice, contributing to more effective community governance, conflict resolution, and collective decision-making processes. Communities with strong traditional music traditions often demonstrate superior ability to organize collective projects and address shared challenges.

Cross-cultural musical collaborations within Sabah's multicultural environment create opportunities for intercultural understanding and appreciation while maintaining respect for distinct cultural traditions. The research documented numerous examples of musical exchanges between different ethnic groups, including collaborative performances, shared festivals, and cross-cultural musical learning. These intercultural musical activities promote mutual understanding and respect while strengthening overall social cohesion within Sabah's diverse population. Participants consistently reported that involvement in intercultural musical activities enhanced their appreciation for cultural diversity while strengthening their commitment to their own cultural traditions.

Contemporary community engagement through traditional music includes innovative approaches such as community music education programs, intergenerational music groups, and traditional music therapy initiatives that address contemporary social challenges while maintaining cultural authenticity. These programs demonstrate how traditional music can be adapted to address modern community needs such as youth engagement, elder care, and social healing while preserving its essential cultural characteristics and community-building functions. The success of these initiatives illustrates the continued relevance of traditional music as a tool for promoting community engagement and social cohesion in contemporary Sabah society.

CONCLUSION

The research findings conclusively demonstrate that traditional music plays a multifaceted and essential role in promoting cultural participation among Sabah's diverse indigenous communities, serving simultaneously as a marker of cultural identity, a mechanism for intergenerational knowledge transmission, and a catalyst

for community engagement and social cohesion. The evidence reveals that communities with active traditional music practices maintain stronger cultural connections, more effective intergenerational relationships, and higher levels of social capital compared to communities where traditional music has declined. These findings underscore the critical importance of supporting and preserving traditional music practices as fundamental components of cultural heritage and community well-being in contemporary Sabah.

The implications of this research extend beyond academic interest to encompass practical considerations for cultural policy, education, and community development in Sabah and similar multicultural regions. The study's findings suggest that investments in traditional music preservation and promotion represent effective strategies for strengthening cultural identity, improving intergenerational relationships, and enhancing community resilience in the face of rapid social change. Future research should examine the long-term impacts of digital technology on traditional music transmission, explore innovative fusion approaches that maintain cultural authenticity while attracting younger participants, and investigate the potential for traditional music-based interventions to address contemporary social challenges such as cultural alienation and community fragmentation.

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