

Songs that Tell Stories: Preserving the Musical Heritage of Rungus Children's Songs in Sabah, Malaysia

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Received	Reviewed	Revised	Published
14.07.2023	07.08.2023	12.12.2023	31.12.2023

<https://doi.org/10.61275/ISVSej-2023-10-12-05>

Abstract

The Rungus, an indigenous Dusunic ethnic group in Sabah, primarily inhabit the Kudat and Pitas Districts. Within Rungus culture, a plethora of intangible cultural heritage have been transmitted orally from one generation to the next. These cultural treasures hold immense value as educational resources, fostering cultural awareness and appreciation among children from diverse ethnic backgrounds across Malaysia. However, it is noteworthy that these significant cultural elements have not yet been incorporated into the national music education curriculum.

This research documents, transcribes, analyzes and select appropriate longoi tanganak music (children's songs) for the preservation and understanding of Rungus culture. The study employed field trip techniques, including participant observations, in-depth and focus group interviews, as well as audio and video recording. A collection of 27 storytelling songs was gathered from the Kudat and Pitas Districts.

This study focuses on discussing six different variations of the Yabaron/Yobouron/Yontubaron songs, which are part of an oral tradition passed down from generation to generation within the Rungus community. The study found that a common characteristic among most of these variants (B, C, E, and F) is the use of a tetratonic scale-like melodic material. The songs typically begin with a low pitch and ascend to a higher pitch at the interval of a perfect fifth, following the melodic patterns of "do do do do so so mi" and "do do do do do so mi." In terms of rhythm, the commonly used patterns include tiri-tiri and ti-tiri (Variations A, B, C, and F).

Through the process of transcribing and analyzing these songs, this research contributes to the preservation and understanding of Rungus culture. By examining the melodic and rhythmic elements, the article offers insights into the musical structure and characteristics of Rungus children's songs. The findings enhance our understanding of the cultural narratives, traditions, and lifestyle aspects embedded within these musical expressions.

Keywords: Rungus culture, Intangible cultural heritage, Children's songs, Cultural preservation, Sabah, Malaysia.

Introduction

Recently, the importance of multicultural music education has garnered significant attention among researchers and music educators worldwide (Anderson, 1992; Blair & Kondo,

2008; Campbell, 2002; Loong, 2008; Wong et al., 2015; Wong & Chiu, 2017). Multicultural music education encompasses the exploration of music from diverse cultures, providing students with opportunities to engage with unfamiliar musical traditions and gain insights into different cultural practices.

Malaysia, as a nation, is characterized by its multi-ethnic and multicultural composition, comprising East Malaysia (Sabah and Sarawak) and West Malaysia (Peninsular Malaysia). The country is home to various ethnic groups, such as Malays, Chinese, Indians, and indigenous communities, each with distinct languages, lifestyles, and cultural practices. In this context, integrating a multi-cultural music education approach into the curriculum becomes crucial for fostering harmony, understanding, and appreciation of multiple cultures (Wong & Chiu, 2017).

However, despite the importance of multicultural music education, there is a lack of collected, preserved, and studied Malaysian children's songs, particularly those representing indigenous cultures (Loong, 2008; Chong, 2013; Lim, 2019). While Malay, Chinese, and Indian folk songs have been incorporated into the music curriculum, there remains a dearth of indigenous songs that reflect the diverse cultural heritage of Malaysia. The Kodály philosophy, which emphasizes the use of local folk materials in music education, supports the inclusion of a nation's own folk traditions for effective learning (Simeon & Pugh-Kitingan 2021; Simeon, 2022).

Moreover, the traditional oral literature and vocal music of Sabah, as highlighted by Appell (1990 & 2010) and Pugh-Kitingan (2004 & 2011) are facing a decline in the face of changing times and the emergence of new entertainment media. This decline poses a significant risk of losing invaluable cultural treasures unless efforts are made to document and preserve them.

In this context, his paper introduces Rungus songs that tell stories into music education for Malaysian children. The selected songs are based on their popularity and include six variations from different districts of Kudat and Pitas in Sabah. These songs feature simple phrases and age-appropriate lyrics suitable for children. By integrating multicultural music education, children can develop a deeper understanding of themselves and gain a broader perspective on the fundamental principles of music. The application of the Kodály philosophy, with its emphasis on local folk materials, further reinforces the importance of incorporating indigenous cultural genres into music educational practices. By recognizing and preserving the musical heritage of Rungus children's songs, this research aims to foster cultural appreciation, intergenerational knowledge transfer, and a sense of pride among the Rungus community.

Its objectives are as follows.

1. To document and preserve the Rungus Children's Songs
2. To analyze and understand the cultural significance of Rungus children's Songs

Through the documentation and transcription of these songs, this study will contribute to a comprehensive understanding of Rungus culture and heritage. The written music transcriptions will serve as valuable resources that can be utilized in music classrooms, enabling younger generations to actively engage with and appreciate the musical legacy passed down through the ages. Furthermore, the study's findings will pave the way for broader discussions on the importance of preserving and celebrating diverse cultural expressions in the broader Malaysian society.

Literature Review

This literature review examines the preservation of musical heritage, focusing on indigenous and children's songs, to contextualize the study of Rungus children's songs in Sabah, Malaysia. There are many studies that examine these issues. Among them, Nettle (1983) and Seeger (1992) discuss the preservation of musical heritage, by maintaining cultural identities. Turino (2008) extends this to include the role of music in community engagement, which is particularly relevant for participatory traditions like those of the Rungus.

Rice (2007) and Merriam (1964) explore the methodologies for studying indigenous music. Similarly, Feld (1996) provides a framework for understanding the Rungus songs in

their natural and cultural setting. Interestingly, Marsh (2008) and Campbell (2010) show that children's songs are key in cultural transmission. Koskoff (1987) adds to this and points out that the role of women can offer insights into the transmission of these songs within the Rungus community.

Bradley (2007) and Anderson & Campbell (2010) examine the importance of integrating diverse musical traditions in education. They support the inclusion of Rungus songs in multicultural education. Similarly, Bohlman's (2002) emphasises on cultural context in music education that aligns with the Kodály philosophy, reinforcing the need for local folk materials in music curricula.

Despite extensive research in musical heritage preservation, there is a gap in studies focusing on Rungus children's songs. This study aims to fill this gap, drawing on methodologies and perspectives from Barz and Cooley (2008) and Titon (1992). Moreover, this review highlights the importance of preserving musical heritage, especially in indigenous communities as well as children's songs, and their role in education and cultural transmission. The study of Rungus children's songs is not only a contribution to ethnomusicology but also to the cultural fabric of Malaysia.

Research Methodology

This research employed ethnographic field trip techniques, including in-depth and focus group interviews with the singers, as well as audio and video recording of their performances. According to Creswell (2014), the ethnographic design encompasses qualitative research procedures that aim to describe, analyze, and interpret the shared patterns of behavior within a culture group. By adopting this approach, researchers gain direct access to the social group's culture, enabling them to develop a firsthand understanding of the people's lives and society.

Participant Selection

The primary participants in this study were 23 Rungus singers, aged between 47 to 87, residing in the Kudat and Pitas districts of Sabah. The selection process involved collaborating with gate-keepers such as Azlan Shafie Abdullah@ Raymond Majumah, Pdt. Porodong bin Mogilin, Dr. Paul Porodong, Inulisan binti Sasam, Anglene binti Ulad, Edward Modirim bin Mongurog, Jacklynn Motidsi, and Natalia Tiffany Charles. These individuals provided vital connections to performers and their villages, facilitating the research process.

Given the rich diversity of Rungus vocal music, which includes adult, youth, children's, and ritual songs, this study focused exclusively on children's songs. The singers were selected for their deep knowledge of these songs, their ability to recall melodies from their childhood, and their willingness to share this knowledge.

Interview and Recording Process

Interviews were semi-structured, focusing on the origins, meanings, and cultural significance of the songs. The recording process was carefully planned, with each session aimed at capturing the unique aspects of the songs, including their melodic structures and lyrical content. During each session, essential background information such as date, time, place, singer's profile, and setting were recorded. The interviews comprised a set of structured questions focusing on:

- **The singer's background:** This included personal history, involvement in community music, and their role in preserving Rungus musical heritage.
- **Song context:** Questions aimed at understanding the cultural and social significance of each song, its origins, and occasions where it is typically performed.
- **Characteristics of the song:** This involved discussions about the melodic, rhythmic, and lyrical aspects of the songs, providing insights into their musical structure and cultural relevance.

Field trips were conducted between January 2015 and October 2017 to record Rungus songs in Kudat (Fig. 1) and Pitas Districts (Fig. 2), resulting in a total of 15 visits that covered all nine villages in the area. The study participants primarily consisted of senior villagers who could recall Rungus songs from their childhood and were enthusiastic about sharing them. Throughout the research period, various types of Rungus children's songs, including solo and group performances were recorded. The researchers collected a comprehensive repertoire of 87 Rungus songs, spanning genres such as *longoi pogondoi* (lullabies) and *longoi tanganak* (children's songs).



Fig. 1: Five villages in Kudat District used as research sites
Source: Salbiah Kindoyop, 28 April, 2021.



Fig. 2: Four villages in Pitas District used as research sites
Source: Salbiah Kindoyop, 28 April 2021.

Selection of Songs

Songs were chosen based on cultural significance, singing range suitability for children, musical characteristics, context appropriateness, and authenticity. The transcription approach varied between descriptive and prescriptive notation, depending on the song's intended use for teaching or educational purposes.

Data Analysis

In the analysis of the eighty-seven recorded songs in this study, a wide range of melodic structures and tone sets was observed. Sixteen songs were recited in heightened speech, while the remaining seventy-one songs were sung. The most common tone sets in the sung songs were 'do-re-mi-so and do-mi-so'. The majority of the songs could be transcribed in simple duple and quadruple meters. The prevalent structural form was the 'a b' variant (49.43%), followed by the 'a b c' form (19.54%), and 'a' form (17.24%). Hence, it can be concluded that most of the collected Rungus songs exhibit simplicity in terms of their tone set, form, and meter. However, motifs within the songs often incorporate rhythmic patterns such as 'tiri-ti' and 'tiri-tiri'.

Discussion

In the Rungus language, the term "longoi" signifies singing or song, which has been passed down orally through generations. Alongside lullabies, known as "longoi pogondo," the Mr. Azlan @Raymond Majumah (singer 1), in this research specifically referred to children's songs as "longoi tanganak." According to elderly members of the Rungus community, these longoi tanganak songs encompass a wealth of cultural knowledge that illuminates the Rungus way of life. Within the collection of 87 Rungus children's songs examined, numerous compositions feature phrases intricately intertwined with traditional customs, beliefs, and lifestyle, providing valuable insights into Rungus culture. These songs can be classified into various categories as follows

- counting songs (7 songs),
- word chain songs (17 songs),
- call-and-response songs (4 songs),
- storytelling songs (28 songs),
- singing games (3 songs),
- tickling songs (2 songs), and
- lullabies (26 songs).

The primary purpose of these songs is to entertain children and fill their leisure time. Many Rungus individuals have committed the song lyrics to memory, despite not fully comprehending their meaning. This is because the lyrics often incorporate archaic Rungus words that possess a poetic quality, which may be unfamiliar to the younger generation. Mr. Ranjamal bin Montuduk (Fig. 3) observed that certain Rungus children's songs lyrics feature obsolete Rungus words that are no longer commonly used, rendering them less accessible to contemporary Rungus individuals .



Fig. 3: Ranjamal bin Montuduk, 58 years old from Kampung Matunggong, Kadet.
Source: Author

Songs That Tell a Story

This paper explores songs that convey stories through poetic lyrics, highlighting their crucial role in children's learning. As children listen and imitate the narratives woven within these lyrics, they engage with a wide array of themes from the past, including people, animals, food, agriculture, accessories, teasing, jokes, and moral lessons.

28 storytelling songs were gathered from the Kudat and Pitas Districts. These songs, which include number counting, word chains, and lullabies, exhibit distinct variations that differ across various regions. Notable among these are the Yabaron/Yobouron/Yontubaron songs, which have six variations; Ongkul-Ongkul Paara, with four variations; Turuwik-Ruwik, with three variations; and Torinanggo-Torinanggo, with two variations.

Yabaron/Yobouron/Yontubaron storytelling songs reveal six different variations originating from various villages in the Kudat and Pitas areas. These include one song from Kampung Taradas, Pitas; two songs from Kampung Matunggong, Kudat; one song from Kampung Barambangon II, Kudat; and two songs from Kampung Tinangol, Kudat. Table 1 presents these songs, along with details about the singers and the stories they tell.

Table 1: Compilation of Rungus Storytelling Songs: Variations, Singers, and Narratives
Source: Author

Song Title	Singer(s)	Story
Yobouron 1	Azlan @ Raymond Majumah	Yobuaron searching for medicinal plants for his child bitten by a caterpillar
Yobouron 2	Ranjamal Montuduk	Yobuaron's child bitten by a caterpillar due to stealing a yam.
Yontubaron 3	Jelny binti Borukot, Inulisan binti Sasam, Inombiaa binti Gunsodong	Preparation for a wedding ceremony and making rice wine
Yontubaron 4	Inowoling Binti Montuku	Similar to Yontubaron 3 with variations in words and melody. " <i>mongongor</i> " (take) and " <i>nunu</i> " (we) added
Yobuaron 5	Mojihut bin Malisap	Yobuaron looking for medicine for his child bitten by a caterpillar.
Yabbaron 6	Tawagas Tawadan	Adventures of Yobuaron in the jungle
Ongkul Paara 1	Azlan @ Raymond Majumah	Teasing song about a monkey and a child stung by a bee.
Ongkul Paara 2	Azlan @ Raymond Majumah	Children finding a maize plant.
Ongkul Paara 3	Azlan @ Raymond Majumah	Similar to Ongkul Paara 2 with a lyrical mistake changing the story. " <i>imot</i> " (the maize) instead of " <i>kimot</i> " (monkey). " <i>The maize saw the monkey</i> " instead of " <i>Monkey saw the maize</i> ".
Ongkul Paara 4	Azlan @ Raymond Majumah, Ranjamal Montuduk	Teasing song about a monkey and a child stung by a bee.
Turuwik-Ruwik 1	Azlan @ Raymond Majumah	Child asking to bathe quickly due to fear of <i>posigunggut</i> .
Turuwik-Ruwik 2	Rundabang Rinsapu	Sarcastic song about a mother's infidelity
Surudo Oku Ondig	Azlan @ Raymond Majumah	Children inviting friends to bathe, frustration with excuses.
Torinanggo-Rinanggo 1	Azlan @ Raymond Majumah	with a focus on excuses for not bathing
Torinanggo-Rinanggo 2	Ranjamal Montuduk	Similar to Torinanggo-Rinanggo 1 with a focus on excuses for not bathing
Ki Ki Vogok Ku	Azlan @ Raymond Majumah	Teasing a pig rearer about his pigs having diarrhea
Kiyonggok-Kiyonggok	Mongintal bin Jimah	Two women feeding pigs and contemplating a communal meal.

Sing Sing	Azlan @ Raymond Majumah	Various animals, plants, and humans interacting and destroying each other.
Sira-Sira	Tinongkihik binti Sogintap	A weak dog hunting and catching a thin animal.
Tong Boyuang	Tinongkihik binti Sogintap	A bear stung by a bee and a slow-moving tortoise.
Tung Tung	Tinongkihik binti Sogintap	Frogs croaking and swallows dancing, symbolizing active children.
Mondiga	Tinongkihik binti Sogintap	Mother waking up family for work in rice swidden, illustrating traditional lifestyle.
Kulili	PK Peter Osingkao	Two friends planning to return to the West from Sandakan
<i>Naru Tinduk di Asat</i>	Jelny binti Borukot and Mr. Jomihot bin Sasam	This song presents a narrated conversation between a <i>sasat</i> or long-beaked hummingbird, and a small grey <i>kokou</i> bird. The story and lyrics of this interesting song references playfulness and teasing between the two birds
<i>Didi</i>	Mojihut bin Malisap	<i>Didi</i> is about a child who is asking his mother to give him a knife to cut tobacco leaves for a wedding ceremony
<i>Kung Kidarun</i>	Azlan @ Raymond Majumah	The song presents two interconnected stories within a word chain game format. The first story describes an earthworm emerging from the ground and being tortured by a character named Goyi. The second story shifts focus to seven or eight elephants that become weak and eventually die due to excessive bleeding. The song concludes with a humorous twist, encouraging people to eat grass.
<i>Gigi-Gigiko Ku Kakangku</i>	Mojihut bin Malisap	The song is a playful and imaginative narrative that starts with calling a pig, described as a black piglet, and then transitions through a series of connected images and actions. It begins at a black drying place owned by Apan, leading to a journey of paddling and sailing to a place called Dangki, located at sea. The story then focuses on the sea itself, describing the bay in the middle of the sea and the rolling waves. This imagery shifts to the stooping of a bambangan fruit, which is then sliced. The song concludes with a pretend threat to slice the chins of children, intended to playfully frighten them. The narrative is tied together with repetitive and rhythmic phrases, creating a vivid and engaging word chain.
<i>Kiyonggok-Kiyonggok</i>	Mongintal bin Jimah	The song narrates a scene where two Rungus ladies are feeding their pigs. They engage in a playful conversation with a pig, asking where it's from and about its identity, to which the pig responds by mentioning its distinctive stripes and spots. The ladies, addressed as Kuyadi, decide to take a break (<i>mingkod</i>) in anticipation that someone might invite them for a meal, specifically a dish of pumpkin shoots mixed with shrimps. The song captures a moment of daily life, blending care for animals with the anticipation of communal eating and social interaction.

The analysis of Rungus children's songs, particularly those that tell stories, reveals a rich tapestry of cultural significance and educational value. These songs, collected from the Kudat and Pitas Districts, serve as a window into the Rungus community's past, reflecting their traditions, beliefs, and everyday life.

Cultural Narratives and Themes:

Songs like "Yobouron 1" and "Yobouron 2," where Yobouron searches for medicinal plants or deals with the consequences of his child's actions, highlight the community's close relationship with nature and the importance of medicinal knowledge.

"Yontubaron 3" and "Yontubaron 4," depicting wedding preparations and rice wine making, illustrate the social and communal aspects of Rungus life, emphasizing the significance of rituals and celebrations.

Variations and Regional Identity:

The variations in songs like "Yabaron/Yobouron/Yontubaron" across different villages indicate the dynamic nature of oral traditions and the influence of geographical and social environments on cultural expressions.

These variations not only preserve the uniqueness of each village's cultural identity but also demonstrate the adaptability of oral traditions to different contexts.

Educational Aspects:

Songs such as "Ongkul Paara 1" and "Ongkul Paara 2," with their playful and teasing nature, serve as tools for children's learning, teaching them about their environment and social interactions in a fun and engaging way.

"Turuwik-Ruwik 1" and "Turuwik-Ruwik 2" offer moral lessons and societal norms, showcasing the role of these songs in imparting ethical values and social etiquette to the younger generation.

Preservation of Language and Tradition:

The use of traditional and sometimes archaic Rungus language in songs like "Kiyonggok-Kiyonggok" and "Gigi-Gigiko Ku Kakangku" emphasizes the importance of preserving the linguistic heritage and offers a challenge to the younger generation to connect with their ancestral language.

These songs act as a repository of the Rungus language and oral traditions, ensuring the continuity of cultural knowledge and practices.

Reflection of Daily Life and Humor:

"Sing Sing" and "Sira-Sira" reflect the interaction of humans, animals, and nature, portraying the everyday experiences and the humor inherent in the community's life.

"Mondiga" and "Kulili" depict scenes from daily life, such as working in rice fields or planning journeys, highlighting the community's connection to their land and their aspirations.

Symbolism and Storytelling:

The narrative structure of songs like "Kung Kidarun" and "Naru Tinduk di Asat" uses symbolism and storytelling to convey messages, entertain, and educate, showcasing the rich oral tradition of the Rungus people.

The collection of Rungus children's songs is a significant cultural asset that offers insights into the community's history, values, and social norms. These songs are not just a form of entertainment; they are a vital part of the community's cultural heritage and educational system. They play a crucial role in preserving the Rungus language, traditions, and identity, making them an invaluable resource for understanding and appreciating the richness of the Rungus culture.

Conclusions

The exploration and documentation of Rungus children's songs in Sabah, Malaysia are not only an academic endeavor but also a cultural imperative. This paper concludes that these songs, embedded with stories, traditions, and wisdom, form an integral part of the Rungus community's intangible heritage. They are a testament to the community's rich oral tradition, reflecting their deep connection with nature, their social customs, and their moral values.

The songs serve multiple purposes: they are a source of entertainment, a means of cultural transmission, and a tool for education. The variations in the songs across different villages highlight the dynamic and evolving nature of oral traditions, adapting to the nuances of each community while maintaining a core of shared cultural identity. Through the meticulous process of recording, transcribing, and analyzing these songs, this research has illuminated the multifaceted nature of Rungus musical heritage.

It is also concluded that there is an urgent need to preserve these songs as a means of safeguarding the Rungus language and traditions. In a rapidly changing world, where traditional ways of life are increasingly under threat, these songs offer a link to the past, a sense of identity, and a means of connecting with one's heritage. They are not merely relics of a bygone era but are living, breathing expressions of a culture that continues to evolve.

Moreover, this research advocates the inclusion of these songs in the Malaysian music education curriculum. It is a step towards a more inclusive and culturally diverse educational system. It aligns with the Kodály philosophy of using local folk materials in music education, fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of Malaysia's rich cultural tapestry among the younger generation. This approach not only enriches the students' musical experience but also promotes cultural empathy, understanding, and respect.

This research contributes significantly to the field of ethnomusicology and to the broader understanding of Malaysia's cultural heritage. By documenting and analyzing Rungus children's songs, this study not only preserves a vital aspect of the Rungus community's cultural heritage but also opens up avenues for further research and exploration in the field of indigenous music and cultural studies. It is a step towards ensuring that these songs, and the stories and traditions they carry, continue to resonate and inform future generations, thereby keeping the rich tapestry of Rungus culture alive and vibrant.

Biography

Jinky Jane C Simeon holds the position of Senior Lecturer in the music program at the Academy of Arts & Creative Technology, Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS). Her impressive accomplishments include winning six PEREKA gold medals, three ITEX gold medals, and two MTE gold medals. In 2013, she was honored with the prestigious title of "Woman Inventor of the Year." Her project "The Tuniring," which focused on Teaching Research and Pedagogical Items, received a gold medal and special awards from the Taiwan Invention Association at the 2014 Seoul International Invention Fair (SIIF). Jinky Jane's research interests encompass areas such as early childhood music education, multicultural music education, and the music and dance of Borneo. Her expertise and dedication contribute to the advancement of these fields and inspire fellow educators and researchers.

Glossary

longoi- singing, song; *blongoi pogondoi*- lullaby; *longoi tanganak*- children's song

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