

Aree Lkhua Song: A Musicological Analysis of Pakapel Tradition Among the Kelabit Tribe in the Upper Baram River, Sarawak.

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Abstract

The Kelabit are among the indigenous tribe dwelling in about sixteen small villages deep in the Borneo tropical rainforest near to the Indonesian border. The nearest town is Miri, which is only accessible via logging dirt road or a nineteen-sitter airplane served by Mas Wings rural air service. The tribe who mostly settled in longhouses used to be known with their headhunting tradition possess a very unique musical culture. Aree lakhua is a match-making song sung by young unmarried women in Pakapel tradition to attract single man to marry her. With the intrusion of western musical culture as well as the influence of Christianity in the society, this tradition is now no longer widely practiced and soon will be extinct. This work aims to reveal and analyse the musical aspect of the pakapel tradition among the Kelabit society. Using a combination of musicological and ethnographic approaches, the author presents the functional facts as well as analysing the musical aspects of the song. This work, complete with audio and video materials as well as musical transcription, contributes not only to ethnomusicological theory and method but also to a deeper understanding of the Kelabit musical culture.

Keywords: Kelabit, Pakapel, Aree Lakhua, Baram, Ethnomusicology

INTRODUCTION

The Kelabit population of about 5000 people constitutes the smallest ethnic group in the state of Sarawak and has long been a community of highland dwellers in a mountainous region known as the Kelabit Highlands at an altitude of about 1000 meters above sea level. The highland bordering Indonesia is separated by the Baram river which stretches across Eastern Sarawak and the Limbang district. There are currently around 1800 Kelabit people living in the highlands and the rest have moved from the highlands to pursue their education and getting better positions in major cities such as Miri, Bintulu, Kuching, Kuala Lumpur and so forth. Some of them work in professional fields such as lecturers, engineers, scientists, and others.

Originally the Kelabits in the highlands, like most other ethnic groups in Sarawak also live in longhouses. Nowadays, most of them have built their own homes in small villages around Bario, Sarawak. There are currently 16 small villages in Kelabit Highlands namely Pa'Umur, Pa'Ukat, Pa'Lungan, Long Dano, Pa Dalih, Ramudu, Pa Ramapuh Benah, Pa Ramapuh Dita, Pa Derung, Ulung Palang Dita, Ulung Palang Benah, Padang Pasir, Kampung Baru, Arur Layun, Bario Asal dan Arur Dalan. There are also 4 other Kelabit settlements located along the Baram River namely Long Peluan, Long Seridan, Long Lellang, and Long Napir.

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Although the Kelabit people have undergone rapid changes in their social and economic life over the last 50 years, they are still able to preserve some aspects of their own culture, especially music and dance. Traditional instruments such as *Sape* (plucked lute) and *Pagang* (bamboo tube zither) are performed in many of their ceremonies and cultural events. These instruments are used to accompany traditional and cultural dances like warrior dances, long dances and solo dances.

Like many other indigenous peoples of Sarawak and Borneo, the Kelabit peoples also have no written language. Thus many stories, including legends, myths and folklore, are passed down to younger generations orally. However, there are now some foreign researchers and pscholars from Kelabit itself who are beginning to document this valuable cultural heritage. Nevertheless, there is still much that researchers need to do to document this heritage.

OBJECTIVES

The main purpose of this study was to document the practice of Kelabit's traditional music who populates the upstream of the Baram River in Sarawak. The two specific objectives of this study are as follows;

- i. Analysing the *Pakapel* tradition of the Kelabit people in term of its functions and practices.
- ii. Conducting a musicological analysis of the *Are Lakhua* song in order to understand the cultural expressions in Kelabit's musical tradition.

METHODOLOGY

The process of collecting and analyzing data to understand Kelabit's music practice requires researchers to make full use of qualitative data (Frankle & Wallen, 1993). Generally, the method of ethnomusicological research has been utilised extensively in this study. Subsequently, the method of transcription of music is used to assist in understanding the data obtained in the field. Although, the transcription of the song into a western musical standard notation does not fully represent the musical elements of Kelabit song, but it can help researcher to analyse it musically.

The research process begins by identifying in detail what is being achieved through literature reviews and then developing a careful plan to launch the research. Subsequently, fieldwork was conducted to collect the relevant data needed for this study. The recorded music samples were then transcribed into western music notation to facilitate their understanding and analysis. The content of this data is further analyzed using musicological analysis method. The research paradigm is shown in figure 3.1 below.

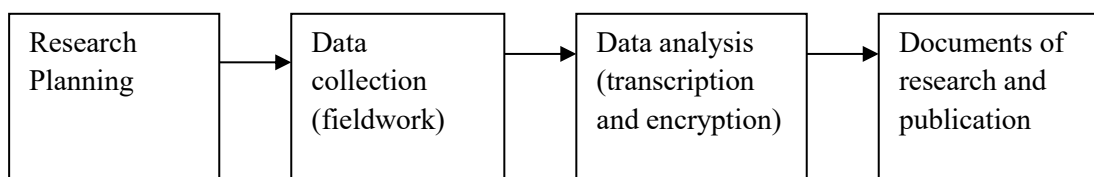


Figure 1: Research Paradigm

Informant

This study focuses on the musical practices of Kelabit's community in Kelabit Highlands located at the upper river of Baram River, Sarawak. The main informants are Kelabit peoples who live in several villages of the area. Most of the informants selected for interviews and recordings consisted of men and women of old age. This is because they are more discerning and years of their culture passed down from their ancestors than those of children and youth who have been greatly influenced by the western culture.

The identified informants were interviewed and asked to sing or play as many songs as they still played in various events in the Kelabit community. Because of this is an extensive study, informants have been selected from several villages around Bario Highlands, Sarawak. The main informants who contributed to the research were Gerul Nulun, Jenette Ulun and Sinarang Lemulun who lived in a longhouse in the village of Bario Asal. Chief of the tribe, Mr Robertson, who lives in the village of Pa 'Ramapuh, also provided useful information on this study.

In addition to the villagers around the Kelabit highlands, several Kelabit people who had moved to the area for work were also interviewed. This included Associate Professor Dr Poline Bala, Steven Baya, Robin Mawan Ayu, and a few others, who grew up in Kelabit village but have migrated to get education and jobs outside the area. Some have lived overseas, such as the United States and the United Kingdom.

Analysis of Data

The *Aree Lakhua* song (Appendix 1) has been analyzed using musicological analysis method to obtain a deeper understanding of its musical characteristic. *Aree Lakhua* songs and music samples recorded in fieldwork were transcribed in the form of western musical notation to facilitate the analysis process musicologically. Two music notation software, namely Encore, and Sibelius were used to help researchers transcribe the recorded song. The recording was repeatedly listened to and sung by researchers to understand the musical aspects of the songs fully. Once the notation is completed, it is replayed using the software to re-hear the accuracy of the written melody and rhythm. This process has helped researchers to ensure that the written notation is as accurate as of the actual song.

To assure the accuracy of the written melody, the song that has been transcribed by using both software was converted to a MIDI (*Musical Instruments Digital Interface*) file and replayed using a MIDI player. Some music lecturers have been asked to listen to the song again and compare it with the original recordings. Corrections to the notation were made for any part of the transcription that was felt to be inaccurate. This process has resulted in the proper transcription of the recording. It should be noted, however, that the use of western notation systems to describe folk songs and music is not one hundred percent accurate because many of the elements of music such as melismatic, microtone and so on cannot be written accurately using the system.

PAKAPEL TRADITION

Aree Lakhua is a song sung solo without music accompany. It is sung in the *Pakapel* tradition (finding a future husband) in the Kelabit community. Similar to the traditions of some other ethnic groups such as the Iban, the Kelabit people also practice the tradition of finding a partner. In the Iban community, it is referred to as *Ngayap*, but to the Kelabit peoples, they call this tradition as *Pakapel*. The young man who wants to find a wife will go to the girl's longhouse. In the evening, there is a match-maker who will send a girl to the young man. If the young man doesn't like her, then he should politely reject it. The girl's dignity must be respected and preserved. It is not something that is taken lightly. Normally, the young man will marry a girl of his social status.

In this tradition, the girl would sing a song called *Aree Lakhua*, which the lyrics compliment the young man for his attention. The girl's vocal ability in singing the song will entice the young man to marry her. So the girl must be good

at singing the song beautifully. The girl who does not know how to sing *Aree Lakhua* perfectly should learn from the expert in the community.

MUSICOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF *AREE LAKHUA* SONG

The *Aree Lakhua* song was recorded at a longhouse in Kampung Bario Asal. Overall after the analysis, the characteristics of this song resemble the songs of Western culture. These include aspects of tone, melody, rhythm and meter. It is sung without any other musical accompaniment. This song has been sung by some older women over the age of 55. Some have reached the age of 80. In the past, this song is usually sung by a teenage girl seeking a husband by singing this song.

In terms of song mode, it is sung in a major scale or more precisely in the scale of C major as shown in Excerpt song 1 below. Overall the tone of this song is quite low for women to sing. It is unclear why the song was sung at such a low note that it made the song feel gloomy even though it was sung in a major tone. After several versions of the same recording were made, they were still sung in low tones. The recording of a teenage girl singing this song was not possible because, during the fieldwork, nearly all the teenage girls were absent from the village because they were attending high school in the city.



Excerpt song 1: Sung in C Major

In terms of melody, this song has a fairly simple melody. Most of the notes of the melody are in sequences and less jumpy. The very narrow range of the song made the song very easy to sing. The range of the notes between each other is just a ton and some semitones. There is no significant maslismatic element found in the melody of this song. The ornamentation is almost unheard of except for two notes of three tones (slur), note A to note C as shown in Excerpt song 2 below.

An re___ la khua e la po pa so ma den de o ya lang ngid___

6
re___ la khua bi o___ ka le le to la e ri bad ka pit___

11
re___ la khua ri ban___ pen du a ya ma tin___ git ru mit___

16

Excerpt song 2: Song melody

In terms of rhythm, the song is relatively simple and lacks of synchopation. This makes the song easier to sing. The song is sung in a quadruple meter like most songs in Western tradition. However, the rhythm is in the form of an anacrusis where the strong beat is not in the first syllable as in the transcription of the song's notation. This form of anacrusis rhythm is very common for most of the songs in the Southeast Asian community. This is greatly influenced by the rhythm of the conversation in the languages of the regional community. The anacrusis rhythm of the song is shown in Excerpt 3 below.

An re___ la khua e la po pa so ma den

6

Excerpt song 3: Anacrusis element

In terms of musical form, the melody of this song has only one phrase motif that is repeatedly sung with different lyrics. The motif of the phrase forming the ending of the song with just a perfect cadence of all four bars each. Unlike most Western culture songs with various phrases that make up either binary, ternary, rondo and so on, *Aree Lakhua* song's form is unique. The repetition of song phrases with different lyrics makes the song easier to remember and sing. The example of the msical form is shown in Excerpt Song 4 below.

Frasa 1

Motif 1 Motif 2 Motif 3 Motif 4

6 re la khua bi o ka le le to la e ri bad ka pit

11 re la khua ri ban pen du a ya ma tin git ru mit

16

Exerpt song 4: Musical form

In conclusion, *Aree Lakhua* songs has similarity with songs from Western culture. The question of whether this song is adapted from Western culture or not, should be carefully studied. Based on interviews conducted with some Kelabit people in Bario Asal, this song has been sung since ancient times before the arrival of Westerners to this place. Because this area is very remote and inland, communication with the outside community at one time was very limited. Foreigners and Westerners especially the British began to enter the area in the mid-20th century. This song has been sung long before the arrival of the people from the west. It is, therefore, possible to conclude that the song is authentic without any adaptation or influences from outside. The similarity of musical features as in the analysis above is a coincidence that is just as prevalent in other world musical cultures. However, this song still has its distinctive elements, especially in terms form of the song.

CONCLUSION

The modernization and also the influx of foreign musical culture through various agents have greatly altered the musical culture of the Kelabit people. Elements of music such as the type of music being played as well as the musical instruments have also changed with the influence of Western musical culture especially from the popular music. However, in some ceremonies, traditional music is still played by the Kelabit community. In certain ceremonies such as name changing ceremony, *sape* and *pagang* are still performed traditionally. Vocal music also maintains the cultural identity of the Kelabit community. However, this culture is becoming more and more forgotten. However, it is still performed in some cultural events such as during *Nukenen* festivals and others.

Nowadays, *Pakapel* tradition is no longer performed as it once has. Marriage is no longer determined by custom, but the influence of global culture and the use of electronic communication media play an important role in this regard. Exposure to formal education has also played a major role in custom and culture changes. Many things that were once done have been forgotten especially by the younger generation. The old culture is just a tradition left behind. The ceremonies related to culture are practiced only for cultural and festive occasions. Most are only for tourist attraction. At

some point, the *Pakapel* tradition will continue to be forgotten in this society. Documentation efforts need to be made to preserve cultural heritage of the nation.

With this development, various issues arise that require further study on this matter. One of them is how far can the Kelabit community's musical traditions remain practiced here? Some older Kelabit people expressed their concern about the younger generation's understanding of their ancestors' musical culture. Even some children do not know about their traditional music. *Pakapel* tradition is just one of the cultural practices that will eventually go extinct. There are many cultural practices in the Kelabit community that will receive the same consequences. If this situation escalate, what will happen to Kelabit musical culture in the future?

Many parties need to take effective measures to preserve this very valuable cultural tradition. Apart from the Kelabit community itself which should promote their musical culture, government agencies such as the Ministry involved should take this role more seriously. Scholars need to conduct more research and publications related to this musical culture that reflects the nation. The loss of a culture is a loss of a national identity. This should not happen to the cultural tradition of the Kelabit people in Sarawak.

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Appendix 1

Aree Lakhua

An re___ la khua e la po pa so ma den de o ya lang ngid___ An

6
re___ la khua bi o___ ka le le to la e ri bad ka pit___ An

11
re___ la khua ri ban pen du a ya ma fin git ru mit___ An

16
re___ la khua to nang ro lan bu lan ba ko ba' o peng' ed___ An

21
re___ la khua a ja___ po pe' e mo to na lang lid la lid___ An

26
re___ la khua a pon___ ki la la ma pan i wan ta rong___ An

31
re___ la khua ma pan___ i wan ta rong long pa la mut mu lung___

35
An re___ la khua ta rong long pa nga wal long ka ri but la yut___