

Expressing the Virtue of Bravery in Iban Popular Songs in 1950s-1960s, Sarawak

Introduction

This paper examines Iban popular music as a medium to express the virtue of bravery during the late 1950s to 1960s in Sarawak, Malaysia. The Iban are the largest indigenous ethnic group in Sarawak. The Iban Trackers and Sarawak rangers fought together for the country during the Malayan Emergency (1948-1960) and the Indonesia-Malaysia Confrontation. Popular songs depicted bravery and the attributes of a warrior in Iban song lyrics. The rise of the Iban radio station in 1954 during the British colonial period played a crucial role in disseminating information to the Iban. Within the framework of modernity the Iban popular songs articulated the significance of headhunting as a cultural construct representing the prestige of manhood.

In this paper, I asked the following questions:

- How Iban popular songs articulated the virtue of bravery in Iban culture?
- What factors contributed to the construction of Iban identity while responding to modernity in creating Iban popular music?

My positionality as an ethnomusicologist at the Universiti Malaysia Sarawak has allowed me to again access to the Iban communities. As I personally grown up in Sarawak, I had attended and participating in Gawai Festivals as well as Gawai rituals. As the Ibans in Sarawak, Borneo were renowned for practicing headhunting and territorial migration, and had a fearsome reputation as a strong and successful warring tribe. Therefore, my third research objective aim to investigate

- How Iban popular music was used as a cultural mediator during 1950s-1970s?

Theoretical Framework

Merging the concept of modern, rationalizing modernity, modernization and what it stands for in alternative modernities, this paper positions itself within the localized and time-bound debates in the context of Iban popular music. Most social science theories depict modern as a recognizable historical rupture (Appadurai, 1996). However, Joel S. Kahn (2001, 2003) suggests that in Asia the concept of modernity is different from the West as an exemplary