



The SAGE International Encyclopedia of Music and Culture

Sarawak: Modern and Contemporary Performance Practice

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Book Title: The SAGE International Encyclopedia of Music and Culture

Chapter Title: "Sarawak: Modern and Contemporary Performance Practice"

Pub. Date: 2019

Access Date: May 2, 2019

Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.

City: Thousand Oaks,

Print ISBN: 9781483317755

Online ISBN: 9781483317731

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781483317731.n628>

Print pages: 1895-1897

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The state of Sarawak, located in the north of the island of Borneo, was part of the Sultanate of Brunei until it was gradually ceded to Rajah James Brooke, a British Sea Captain in 1841, when he successfully defeated the pirates who were devastating the region. The Brooke family governed the state until the Japanese Occupation in 1945 (World War II) when it became a British colony. In 1963, it joined Singapore, North Borneo, and Malaya to form the Federation of Malaysia. This entry focuses on music of the native Sarawak population. It does not discuss music development among the Malays and Chinese groups, which make up 45% of the 3.9 million people, including 29 diverse ethnic groups, in Sarawak. Modern and contemporary performance practice in Sarawak is defined by music bearing elements of fusion, experimental, contemporary, ethnic fusion, popular, and avant-garde. This musical style is presented by bands whose signature music combines traditional acoustic and Western electric instruments.

The traditional instruments commonly adopted by these contemporary bands are the *sape'* (a boat-shaped lute) and *jatung utang* (wooden xylophone) of the *Orang Ulu* (people living upriver in the hinterland); the *engkerumong* (small knobbed gongs placed on a horizontal resonator box) and *beduk* (long drum) of the *Ibans*; and the gongs, *sabang* (long framed drum), *ketebong* (cylindrical oblong drum), and *serutong/prunton* (four-stringed bamboo tube zither) of the *Bidayuh*. (Ibans, Bidayuh, and Orang Ulu are the three main groups of indigenous people in Sarawak.) The *sape'*, *jatung utang*, and *engkerumong* provide the melody, while traditional drums and gongs set the rhythmic flair unique to Sarawak. Native Sarawak groups such as Tuku Kame, Sada Borneo, Nading Rhapsody, At Adau, Etnik Revolution, Meruked, and Sayu Ateng have blended these traditional sounds with the beat, groove, rhythm, sound effects, and harmony provided by Western instruments.

Genealogy of Contemporary Music

Two historical events resulted in the formation and development of contemporary music bands. In the 1980s, rural–urban migration brought large numbers of indigenous people to towns for education and employment. By the 1990s, the Sarawak government actively promoted indigenous music, culture, and dance in the tourism industry. The 1990s also marked a crucial global phenomenon as the world music movement spread from the West to this region via what Arjun Appadurai describes as the transnational flows of people and cultures.

Randy Raine-Reusch, a Canadian composer, producer, and instrument collector, was in Sarawak in the 1990s studying and documenting traditional musical instruments. He founded the world music outdoor festival with Edgar Ong, Edric Ong, and Robert Basiuk, and the proposal was brought to Jane Lian Labang, General Manager of the Sarawak Cultural Village where the festival would be held.

The Sarawak Tourism Board responded positively with the first Rainforest World Music Festival (RWMF) held in the Sarawak Cultural Village, Kuching, in 1997. According to Heidi Munan, native musicians were challenged to create something new in the ancient rainforest and to present a new context for the traditional music, sound, and culture of Sarawak.

This mandate fell on the musical director of the Sarawak Cultural Village, Narawi Rashidi, who formed the Tuku Kame band in 1998. “Our Beat, Our Rhythm” reflects a unique fusion of traditional with modern sounds and instrumentation to put Sarawak on the world music map. RWMF was a watershed for contemporary music in Sarawak and a turning point in Narawi’s career.

From Traditional *Sape'* to *Sapecoustic*

In olden days, music was commonly played in the *ruai*, the communal living corridor of a longhouse, for personal recreational activity or the entertainment of family members or visitors. The instrument just had to be

audible within the vicinity. However, by the 21st century, as more performances were held in concert halls or outdoors, the acoustic and tuning limitations of traditional instruments became innovative challenges for musicians aspiring to reach a wider audience.

Narawi's inventive nature made him one of the great sape' innovators. Borrowing the concept from the electric guitar, he developed the *sapecoustic*, a modern version of the electric sape'. For electronic sound amplification, the original *rattan* (climbing plant) strings were replaced with steel guitar strings, and guitar amplification and pickup fixtures were incorporated onto the sape' soundboard. Additional frets and strings from the traditional two to now four or six were added for a virtuosic and showmanship performance with a modern band. Standardizing tuning to 440 Hertz was necessary to enable the sape' to blend with Western instruments. This ingenious evolution of a tribal acoustic lute has enabled the creation of modern compositions incorporating its haunting melody.

Tuku Kame won the Worldstars-Road to Hollywood 2009 and represented Malaysia in the 12th World Championship of Performing Arts in Hollywood. The band impressed judges with their ethnic-fusion contemporary concept and received four gold medals (Open, Original, Classic, and Contemporary). Following this success, the band released their first album *Rhythm of Rainforest* in 1998 and *Gadong* (meaning "Green") in 2001. *Gadong* advocates for the protection of Sarawak's rainforest and the environment. Tuku Kame set an example as a catalyst in ethnic contemporary music for young musicians to explore possibilities of new sounds, production, and creative arrangements.

Emerging Contemporary Ensembles and Soloists

Anak Adi' Rurum (Young Children of the *Kelabit Rurum* Association) came into the music scene at the 2003 RWMF. The group was formed by parents concerned that their urban-bred children would abandon their Kelabit roots and traditions. This first all-girls sape' group immediately gained attention from the media, older folks, and musicians. It had been a taboo for women to play or even hold this male-dominated instrument. Their performance was a public statement about the shift of orthodox views on gender within the Orang Ulu traditions.

The group later renamed as Kan'id (meaning "cousins" in the Kelabit language), reflecting 21st-century women who radiated dream, hope, and longing. Their repertoire, inspired by their parents and community elders of the Baram, are modern adaptations of ancestral chants, stories, lullabies, children's songs, social and spiritual songs, and dance tunes. The modern sape' with percussion, drums, and electric and bass guitar portrayed an array of eclectic compositions, a strategy to bridge the ancient and the contemporary.

Since 2013, Alena Murang (a key figure of Kan'id) continued her advocacy work in music and the art scene, aiming to promote Sarawak, particularly the sape'. Her debut extended play recording *Flight*, released in 2016, attempts to create an ethnic fusion sound to represent her Kelabit heritage and folk songs.

Reviving the musical heritage of older generations, Nading Rhapsody's music is a unique array of cross ethnic-fusion materials taken from Iban chants, ritual and folk songs, lullabies, and mythical stories from the cultural roots of each band member. Haunting chants and invocation of ancient spirits or gods are highlighted by the strong vocal, making them the avant-garde Borneo ethnic band. While their music relies on electric instruments for funky rhythms, they also feature sape', unique to Sarawak. Their bold approach in music, image, dressing, and makeup has earned them the label *experimental, radical, and provocative*.

In 2014, a native South Korean, Ju Hyun Lee (nickname Juju), joined the At Adau band after meeting one of the members at RWMF 2013 while backpacking around Southeast Asia. Integrating experiences and instrument collections through musical encounters with various musicians and teachers, they consider themselves the Experimental World Music Band. Their distinctive trait combines musical instruments from around

the world. Djembe, conga, cahorn, Western drums, and the Bidayuh ketepong form the heart of rhythmic percussive sounds that adds a modern touch against the modern sape', which plays the role of soloist rendering melodic tunes and improvisatory sections. Syncopations, attacks, strong beats, and thumps prompt a dance-like atmosphere. The group also ventured into the local scene, performing in pubs and cafés once they had incorporated musical instrument digital interface keyboard for software instrument patches as a way of layering sounds.

Sarawak musicians who continue to pursue careers in sape' and its teaching are Mathew Ngau Jau, Alena Murang, Saufi Aiman, Anderson Kalang, Ezra Tekola, Leslie Eli, Hezekiah Asim, among many others. These musicians play a vital role in the continuation, dissemination, and marketing of sape' music through educational talks, workshops, performances, and recordings.

International and Local Musical–Cultural Scenes

At the turn of the 21st century, endeavors to keep cultural–musical traditions alive have involved government, communities, and cultural institutions. Music festivals and competitions organized within and outside Sarawak provide incentives and encourage participation. Annual events (Borneo Cultural Festival, Miri Jazz Festival, World Harvest Festival, and Baram Sape' Masters) held in different cities in Sarawak (Sibu, Miri, Bintulu, and Marudi) provide the platform and performance opportunities for emerging or talented artists.

A group of college students (whose members were mainly Sarawakians) wowed judges and their audience during the first season's audition round of Asia's Got Talent in 2015. "Sada Borneo" (The Sound of Borneo) represented a musical identity of Borneo with its rainforest and nature. Their qualifying and semifinal piece portrayed the depth of musical texture, multilayered with sounds from modern and traditional instruments, and nature. The collage of sounds from modern sape' with Western instruments (bass, electric guitar, cahorn, and synthesizer) together with nature sounds (tropical rain represented by a rainstick instrument and Bornean frogs and birds) set forth the mood, imagination, and experience of a rainforest soundscape composition.

Etnik Revolution came into the music scene after winning the Borneo Talent Award in 2013, which launched their group. Based in Sibu, this group of nonprofessional musicians also features modern sape' with modern band sounds.

Musicking and Musical Collaboration

Collaborative music projects and recordings between local musicians of various ethnic backgrounds and international musicians from outside Sarawak have contributed significantly to the dynamics of contemporary music performance. Synergies from collaborative *musicking* among musicians generated ideas for new instrumental compositions, an intermixture of different cultures and musical traditions in new repertoires.

Sape'-jazz became a popular trend after the successful fusion concert "Jazz Meets Sape'" in Kuala Lumpur. Members of the Manhattan Jazz Quintet with Jerry Kamit on the sape' performed Narawi Rashidi's *Primuhku* (My Dream) composition. After a short holiday in Sarawak, French jazz musician Julien Cottet was captivated by the mesmerizing sound of sape'. He began to learn to play sape' from renowned teachers Mathew Ngau Jau and Jerry Kamit. In 2016, he made his first album *Rumah Panjang* (Longhouse). The repertoire stayed true to traditional Orang Ulu tunes and composition with a touch of jazz improvisation flair.

Two outstanding national musicians Germain Randrianarisoa Rajery of Madagascar and Jerry Kamit of Sarawak met during the 2001 RWMF. The album *Tsara be Sarawak* (Beautiful Sarawak) was produced from their collaboration. Their musical arrangements feature the interplay performance of two different cultures, in-

struments, and musical dialogues between each national instrument, *valiha* (a tube zither instrument) and the modern sape’.

The dynamics of music creation and performance practices in the 21st century changed the musical landscape of Sarawak. While ethnic music once accompanied dances, rituals, healing, post-battle celebrations, or community recreation, it has evolved to cater to mass audiences, tourists, and the younger generation. The contemporary model that blends modern and traditional sounds has been the concerted effort of musicians, instrument makers, educators, and cultural institutions. Their collaboration has preserved the traditional instruments and music culture of Sarawak.

See also [Borneo: History, Culture, and Geography of Music](#); [Malaysia: History, Culture, and Geography of Music](#); [Malaysia: Modern and Contemporary Performance Practice](#)

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781483317731.n628>

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