

Blame It on My Parents! - Parental Heritage Influence on Iban Popular Music Consumption and Ethnic Identity Among Iban Youths in Malaysia

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Abstract: The Iban is an indigenous group living in the Malaysian state of Sarawak, located on Borneo Kalimantan. The study examined ethnic identity and consumption of Iban pop songs by investigating the influence of half- or full-Iban parentage on knowledge, attitudes and practices of listening to Iban pop songs. Questionnaire data were collected from 189 Iban participants (21.16% half-Iban; 78.84% full-Iban). The favourite genre of Iban pop songs is ballads but 74.6% of the participants could sing the iconic Iban rock song, *Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis*. A majority of the Iban participants listened to Iban pop songs on YouTube channels although a fair number still used the radio and mobile phones. The participants believed that Iban songs can unite the Iban and represent the Sarawakian identity. The male participants were more familiar with Iban pop songs than the female participants. Consumption of Iban music does not differ significantly with monthly income and education level. The results showed that full-Iban participants are more interested in, knowledgeable about, and positive about Iban pop songs, compared to half-Iban participants. The full-Iban participants felt strongly that Iban songs can represent the Malaysian identity, and modern Iban culture and attain the international standard. The findings suggest that Iban parents shape their children's interest in Iban popular music by inculcating a strong Iban ethnic identity.

Keywords: Iban, ethnic identity, indigenous, knowledge-attitude-practices (KAP), Malaysia, pop songs.

Music and identities are in a reciprocal relationship. Music is a “constitutive part of the culture and hence is important for individual and social identity formation”, and musicking binds members to share social identities such as ethnic identity and national identity (Lidskog, 2017, p. 25). Collective experiences are told through songs, like songs written to record the development efforts of the government in developing countries (Lim, 2019). Over time, as the songs are sung, the collective experiences are transferred to younger generations and this contributes to the maintenance of a historical consciousness for the groups, and the songs are an expression of their cultural identity (Roberson, 2010). As such, music is not only a means for the expression of identities but also facilitates the reproduction and transformation of identities (Lidskog, 2017).

Before embarking on a discussion of songs and identity formation, two layers of social identities, national identity, and ethnic identity, need to be broached. National identity refers to “a specific kind of collective feeling, i.e., a self-image or an understanding” shared by citizens of a nation” (Marschelke, 2021, p. 8). On the other hand, a strong ethnic identity means that

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individuals “evaluate their [ethnic] group positively, prefer or are comfortable with their group membership, are interested in, knowledgeable about, and committed to the group, and are involved in ethnic practices” (Phinney, 1991, p. 194). In the study of social identities in multiethnic societies, ethnic identity, and national identity are often oppositional identities. For example, in Malaysia, strong ethnic identities are often viewed as an obstacle to achieving the unity of diverse groups (Nordin et al., 2018; Rahim, 2018).

Through the ages, songs have been used as a tool to foster a national identity. Examples of songs that cultivate a common identity and connectedness among people of a nation are *Maimoatia* (meaning ‘Cherish it’) from New Zealand (Haunui-Thompson, 2016) and “Where the Stars and Stripes and the Eagles Fly” from the United States (McFadgen, 2014). The latter is a song in the country music genre sung by Aaron Tippin, who wrote it with Kenny Beard and Casey Beathard. In the context of Malaysia, popular music that carries messages of unity are “31 Ogos” (“31 August”, the independence day of Malaysia) by the late Sudirman Haji Arshad, and ‘Standing in the Eyes of the World’ by Ella (Adil & Shazlin, 2019). Conversely, a song that heightens indigenous identity is *Ini tanah kita* (This is our land) by Atama Katama about the land rights of the Sabah people in Malaysia (Tang, 2016). Sabah is the other Malaysian state located on Borneo Kalimantan Island, north of Sarawak.

It seems that some popular songs can also foster both layers of social identities, although they may be written for entertainment. For instance, Jerome, Ting, and Perry (2022) found that *Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis*, a popular Iban song in Malaysia, carries messages of unity and a sense of belonging, and its appeal extends beyond that of the indigenous group. People living in Sarawak who are not Iban can identify with the song *Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis* (meaning ‘to have one’s legs shaved’) and it evokes the shared identity of belonging to the same state (Mohamad Said et al., 2021). *Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis* is a love song but the pop song has been played so frequently in social events attended by people of different ethnic groups that they can join in to sing the chorus. Several studies (Jerome, Perry, & Ting, 2022; Mohamad Said et al., 2021) have established that *Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis* constructs a state identity (being Sarawakian) rather than a national identity (being Malaysian) for Iban and non-Iban people. The state identity is particularly strong in Sarawak state, as indicated by the ISEAS Borneo Survey, which found that 63% of respondents identified themselves as Sarawakian first and Malaysian second (Lee, 2018). In the case of *Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis*, a pop song written originally for entertainment, became a resource for constructing new ethnic and state identities. Music not only “expresses and maintains pre-existing identities, but it also provides resources for contesting and negotiating identities and constructing new ones” (Lidskog, 2017, p. 25).

Most studies show that peer influence shapes listeners’ knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions towards songs they consume and songs that become a source of their identity construction (from personal identity to social/group identity) (Boyle et al., 1981; Clarke, 1973; Minks, 1999; Nuttall & Tinson, 2005). However, parental influence in shaping children’s music consumption is less known. Lee and Ting (2016) found an association between familial socialization and strong ethnic identity among the Chinese in Malaysia in their study on parents’ primary school choice. Parents influence the children’s sense of belonging to an ethnic group. Parental socialization involves the intergenerational transmission of information about the history, customs, and traditions of the ethnic group, as well as attitudes and values about the ethnic group, which includes not only ethnic pride but also awareness of discrimination, intergroup mistrust (Hughes et al., 2006). Children who grow up in families where both parents are from the same ethnic group are likely to develop a stronger ethnic identity. They are more entrenched in the language, traditions, cultural practices, and values of the ethnic group. They would likely be more interested in and knowledgeable about the literature and music of the ethnic group as this is part of the familial socialization into the culture of the ethnic group. However, in addition to parental ethnic socialization, for Malaysians of Chinese descent in