

A Preliminary Exploration of How Sarawak Indigenous Popular Music Contributes to the Development of Sarawakian Identity

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Abstract: *This study aimed to investigate the role of Sarawak indigenous popular music (SIPM) in shaping the identity of Sarawakians at personal, social, local, and regional levels. Using surveys and interviews, the research examined how SIPM was perceived by Sarawakians and how it contributed to the creation of their unique identity. The findings revealed that respondents identified SIPM as music that is sung or performed in Sarawak indigenous languages, incorporates musical elements of ethnic groups in Sarawak, portrays indigenous lifestyles and cultures, and represents identities of indigenous groups in Sarawak. The study also found that SIPM played a significant role in creating the Sarawakian identity, which symbolizes the state's diversity, distinctiveness, and harmony through its lyrics, rhythm, beat, and musical activities or engagements it generated. The study's implications suggest that indigenous popular music has a more extensive impact on shaping people's identity beyond their indigenous consciousness. Further research could build on these findings to examine the potential of indigenous popular music in constructing a sense of identity among diverse communities across the world.*

Keywords: indigenous, popular music, identity, Sarawak, Malaysia

1. Introduction

With the advent of the internet and social media, Indigenous musicians are now able to produce popular music in their ancestral or mother tongues and share it with a much wider audience than ever before. As a result, an increasing number of people can listen to music produced by Indigenous Peoples from across the globe.

The appeal of Indigenous popular music (IPM) extends beyond Indigenous fans, as it can attract and emotionally connect with non-Indigenous audiences as well. In 2016, the song "Maimoatia" made its debut on the iTunes New Zealand Music Charts, instantly becoming a hit among many New Zealanders. This gospel-like song, which translates to "Cherish It," encourages all New Zealanders to speak te reo Māori, regardless of their proficiency in the language (Haunui-Thompson, 2016).

Indigenous popular music, such as "Maimoatia," goes beyond just entertaining and pleasing listeners; it also serves as a means for indigenous musicians to reclaim their roots and languages and advocate for the rights of their people (The Guardian, 2022). For example, Peruvian singer-

songwriter Renata Flores is known for her unique musical style, blending R&B, hip-hop, Latin trap, rock, and indigenous Peruvian rhythms (The Guardian, 2022). According to Renata, people had urged her to choose between being from the city or the country, but she fused both aspects to create her style, incorporating Andean music and customs with more modern urban elements (The Guardian, 2022). Similarly, Brazilian rapper, songwriter, actor, activist, and model, Katu Mirim, uses her music to shed light on the Indigenous cause in an urban context and how Brazil's original peoples have been forgotten (The Guardian, 2022).

Indigenous popular music also serves as a means for Indigenous musicians to represent their identities. Lido Pimienta, hailing from Barranquilla, Colombia, is an exemplar who blends traditional Colombian rhythms such as cumbia and bullerengue with contemporary electronic music styles such as synthpop and hyper pop (Vida, 2022). In her song "Nada" (meaning "Nothing"), Lido poignantly expresses the experience of being a woman in a world marked by the suffering of women, as is evident from the song's lyrics.

[Women] carry our pain, like a memory, like an illness, like punch, like a wound. .
. It hurts to be one of us. It hurts when you are of the water, of the sun, and the mountain, it hurts when you are not the mainstream one, you have to survive, not live (Vida, 2022)

María Reyna, a Mixe singer from Oaxaca, Mexico, expresses her pride in being an Indigenous woman through her Jazz and Balero-infused song "Orgullosa soy raíz" (meaning "proud of my roots")(Vida, 2022). This pride is particularly significant in the context of the racism and discrimination that Indigenous Peoples face in Mexico, which is evident in the following lines from the song:

Que honor ser Raíz//de culturas ancestrales//ricas y ceremoniales//que desborda este paíz (translation: What an honour to be Root//of ancestral cultures//that are rich and ceremonial//which overflow this country (Vida, 2022).

Despite indigenous musicians like Lido, who have articulated their perspectives on their musical styles and the Indigenous Popular Music (IPM) movement, There remain several unresolved queries: In what manner does IPM contribute to the formation of individuals' sense of self? What types of identities are established, and precisely how does IPM engender them? These queries extend not only to Lido, but to other indigenous musicians mentioned in this context, as well as indigenous musicians elsewhere. The current study aimed to investigate this by focusing on indigenous and non-indigenous fans or audiences of IPM in the context of popular music by the Indigenous Peoples of Sarawak, Malaysia. More specifically, it aimed to answer the questions below:

1. How is Sarawak Indigenous Popular Music (SIPM) defined by the people of Sarawak?
2. How do they articulate their perception of ethnic and local-regional identity (such as Sarawak identity)?
3. In what ways does SIPM contribute to the formation of these identities?
4. What are their additional perspectives on SIPM?

There are several reasons why Sarawak was selected for this study. Firstly, the region is home to over 20 indigenous groups, which collectively constitute 70.5% or 1,932,600 of its total population of 2.7 million (IWGIA, n.d.). The Iban and Bidayuh are among the largest