

**RETHINKING VISIONS OF “UNITY” AND “BELONGING”:  
INSIGHTS INTO AUDIENCE RESPONSES TOWARDS POPULAR  
MUSIC OF MALAYSIA’S INDIGENOUS ETHNIC COMMUNITIES –  
A CASE OF IBAN POP SONG**

**Collin Jerome<sup>1\*</sup>, Ting Su-Hie<sup>1</sup> and Esther John Perry<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Language and Communication, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, Sarawak, MALAYSIA

<sup>2</sup>School of Foundation Studies, Swinburne University of Technology Sarawak Campus, Sarawak, MALAYSIA

\*Corresponding author: [jcollin@unimas.my](mailto:jcollin@unimas.my)

**Published online:** 27 April 2022

**To cite this article:** Collin Jerome, Ting Su-Hie and Esther John Perry. 2022. Rethinking visions of “unity” and “belonging”: Insights into audience responses towards popular music of Malaysia’s indigenous ethnic communities – A case of Iban pop song. *Kajian Malaysia* 40(1): 109–131. <https://doi.org/10.21315/km2022.40.1.6>

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.21315/km2022.40.1.6>

**ABSTRACT**

*This article presents the findings of a larger ongoing study that explores visions of “unity” and “belonging” among present-day Malaysians that are shaped by their engagements with popular music genres of the country’s indigenous ethnic communities. Through a critical theory-informed qualitative analysis of Malaysians’ views on the popular Iban song, “Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis”, the study described in this article examines the visions of unity and belonging that they conceived through various engagements with the song. The findings show that these visions were co-created in and through a dynamic interaction between the song and the audience. The former evoked a sense of solidarity and cohesion, and the latter conceived their visions of unity and belonging based on those feelings. However, the findings reveal that these visions did not coalesce with the “grand” or “official” narratives of unification and inclusion, given the audience’s strong sense of togetherness and attachment to their state of origin and community rather than to the country and the nation. Such findings are important as they provide*

*insights into the potential role that popular music of Malaysia's indigenous ethnic communities can play in the complex and never-ending process of achieving a national sense of unity, belonging and identity in Malaysia.*

**Keywords:** popular music, unity, belonging, Iban pop song, Malaysia

## INTRODUCTION

Music is an important part of our lives. It takes multiple forms and serves a wide array of functions for different people in various times and contexts. Notwithstanding, music performs the same primary roles irrespective of society, culture and manifestation. They include music as or for (1) emotional expression, (2) aesthetic enjoyment, (3) entertainment, (4) communication and symbolic representation, (5) physical response, (6) enforcing conformity to social norms, (7) validation of social institutions and religious rituals, (8) contributions to the continuity and stability of culture, and (9) contributions to the integration of society (Merriam cited in Clayton 2016). The final role is of interest in this article, given that music can bring people together in numerous ways. Studies have shown that people's various engagements with music (e.g., listening, playing and performing) have a direct impact on the neuro-chemicals in the brain that are powerful in bringing about social closeness and connection (Suttie 2016).

Popular music, the focus of this article, draws people together on various levels despite language and cultural barriers. An example of this is K-pop, a genre of popular music originating in South Korea. The genre's ability to transcend "national, cultural and linguistics borders" (Lee 2014) owes much to its ingenious adoption of world music styles and collaboration with international music powerhouses (Iwabuchi, Tsai and Berry 2017). What is more is that K-pop songs and K-pop idols are powerful social magnets, drawing legions of devoted fans all over the world through the rapid proliferation of online fan communities (Choi and Maliangkay 2014; Lee 2015). Popular music of unity and patriotism is also a powerful force that binds people together around common interests and common purposes. America's country music, for instance, serves as "a vehicle for American values and patriotism, often used to boost the public and the armed forces' morale during difficult times of conflict" (McFadgen 2014). This can be seen in the aftermath of 9/11 as Americans turned to songs of unity and patriotism by popular country music performers to create a sense of unity and togetherness needed during a challenging time (McFadgen 2014). Popular music of Malaysia also evokes feelings of connectedness and love for the country among fellow citizens. Songs such as *31 Ogos* by the late Sudirman Haji Arshad, and *Standing*