

## Iban Pop Song: Identity, Unity, and Belonging

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### ABSTRACT

Popular music has been known to convey a sense of togetherness and affiliation among diverse populations in multiethnic and multicultural nations. Malaysia is a unique case where local mainstream popular music has expressed a collective sense of unity and belonging among its multiethnic citizens and communities. Although numerous studies have examined this phenomenon, very little research has been conducted about the role of local indigenous popular music in communicating a sense of connectedness and inclusion among Malaysians from diverse backgrounds. The study presented in this paper set out to examine this by focusing on the role that Iban pop songs played for that reason. Through a public perception survey, the study gathered the views of 82 respondents from the Southern, Central and Northern regions of Sarawak on the famous Iban pop song, *Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis* by Andrewson Ngalai in terms of how it helped create ideas about unity and belonging among Sarawakians. The findings revealed that the participants asserted that *Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis* instils pride because it is synonymous with various occasions. The results also showed that the *Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis* song made the Sarawakian proud of their origin. The study has implications for future research as it highlights the necessity of acknowledging that the popular musical genre of the indigenous community can bring people together and feel closer to their home country.

**Contribution/Originality:** The study contributes to the existing literature that highlights the need to recognize and acknowledge the role that popular music of indigenous communities plays in bringing people with diverse background together and feel closer to their home country.

## 1. Introduction

Indigenous popular music refers to a popular musical genre that indigenous people worldwide produce. One famous example is Yothu Yindhi, the Australian musical group that brought its brand of aboriginal popular music to the mainstream music landscape in the early 1990s. Indigenous popular music has been the subject of scholarly research, mainly related to people's sense of identity, unity, and belonging. Some of these studies include Thai music and identity conducted by [Eamsa-Ard \(2006\)](#), identity and social cohesion in Mali by [Potter \(2019\)](#), and unity and identity among Malaysians by [Adil and Hamzah \(2019\)](#). However, a prominent gap can be seen between these studies. It is found that the previous studies mainly focus on the construction of national identity rather than focusing on unity or social cohesion. Next, some previous studies focus more on investigating the influencing factor: whether popular music is influenced by the identity of the native community or vice versa. Some previous studies focus mainly on the musical component in creating an indigenous community's identity. However, the previous studies of indigenous popular music and unity are primarily found in the non-Malaysian context. Previous Malaysian studies on indigenous popular music on unity focus on the cultural and emotional impact of popular music on audiences' sense of unity ([Adil & Hamzah, 2019](#)) and how the vision of unity is created through popular music ([Jerome et al., 2021](#)).

From all these gaps, there is still a lack of studies focusing on the role of Indigenous popular songs in identity construction and their connection to the diverse visions of unity in Malaysia. Therefore, to fill in the research gap, this paper investigates the role of music produced by Malaysia's indigenous minority community in constructing national identity and shaping visions of unity in Malaysia on various levels. The paper specifically seeks to investigate the role of the Iban pop song (*Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis* by Andrewson Ngalai) in constructing the Sarawak/kians vision of unity. This paper also analyzes the effects of Iban pop songs on the manifestations and implementations of this vision at both local and national levels through a quantitative method.

## 2. Literature Review

Popular music and its analyses demonstrate the role of music and its impact on consumers. The lyrical content of the song conveys a message to the audience. However, non-linguistic elements also may influence the consumers or the audiences. Various lexical aspects are observed across multiple musical discourses, which comprise lexemes from general to specialized words ([Aleshinskaya, 2013](#)).

The choice of music and stylistic style in modern indigenous musicians fill the gap between Australian nationality and indigenous Australia ([Guy, 2015](#)). The study claimed that indigenous music paves its way in allocating cross-cultural communication that removes the essentialization of myths among indigenous beings. The sound is familiarized among non-indigenous audiences, and it produces an interaction group socially and