

Indigenous Popular Music and Identity: The Case of Sarawak, Malaysia

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Abstract

Aim/Purpose: The study investigated the views of Sarawak indigenous participants and other Sarawakians on whether Sarawak indigenous popular music can construct an indigenous and regional identity. The specific objectives of the study were to compare: (a) their level of familiarity with and knowledge about Sarawak indigenous popular music, (b) their attitudes towards Sarawak indigenous popular music, and (c) their practices in listening to Sarawak indigenous popular music.

Introduction/Background: Most studies of Sarawak indigenous songs have focused on “Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis” and did not investigate the perceptions of indigenous and non-indigenous participants separately to understand whether indigenous pop songs can evoke a shared sense of belonging to Sarawak. As there is a lack of Sarawak-specific related research in Malaysia, the present study is timely and crucial in understanding whether the pop songs of an indigenous group can represent state identity due to living in a shared geographical space, Sarawak, with the indigenous groups.

Methodology: The descriptive study involved 109 participants comprising 41.28% (or 45) Sarawak Indigenous and 58.72% (or 64) other Sarawakians. The term “Sarawakian” refers to Malaysian citizens born in Sarawak. The online questionnaire link was given to participants who fulfilled the selection criteria: (a) Malaysians who are Sarawakians but may be living elsewhere at some point in their lives; and (b) Participants who are aged 18 and above, so parental consent is not required for participating in the study, but there is no age limit. In this study, “Sarawak indigenous” refers to Iban, Bidayuh, Melanau, and Orang Ulu, while “Other Sarawakians” refers to Malay, Chinese, Indian, and others living in Sarawak. There were more female participants, and there was a spread of age groups. Most participants had lived in Sarawak for almost their whole lives, but some came back to live in Sarawak after having lived somewhere else.

An 18-item questionnaire on knowledge, attitudes, and practices relating to Sarawak indigenous popular music was made, comprised of demographic information (five items), knowledge on Sarawak indigenous music (eight items), attitudes towards Sarawak indigenous music (three items), and practices relating to Sarawak indigenous music (two items). The Quizmaker link (<https://take.quiz-maker.com/QE9RYUHGO>) was shared with contacts who were asked to share the link with others. The data comprising the initial 112 responses were filtered, and three incomplete responses were deleted, leaving 109 for the analysis of means and percentages.

Findings: Firstly, a larger percentage (48.44%) of Sarawak indigenous participants were more familiar with and could correctly identify Sarawakian indigenous popular music more readily than other Sarawakian participants (42.82%), as was expected. Secondly, for knowledge of indigenous songs, surprisingly, the non-Sarawak indigenous participants had slightly better knowledge about the history of Sarawak indigenous popular music than the Sarawak indigenous participants. Thirdly, the Sarawak indigenous participants and other Sarawakians were similar in their belief that it is the beat/rhythm that carries the Sarawakian identity (55.05%). The indigenous language played a role in eliciting the feeling of being Sarawakian, but only to 24.77% of the participants. Very few participants (13.76%) thought that the lyrics about the everyday life of Sarawakians made them feel the most Sarawakian.

The content did not seem to be important in a song, as listeners may not pay full attention to the content of the song. Fourthly, listening to indigenous music was more of a habit for Sarawak indigenous participants, with 42.23% of Sarawak indigenous participants listening to it compared to 36.61% for other Sarawakian participants.

Contribution/Impact on Society: The study contributes new knowledge by confirming that Sarawak indigenous music embodies the Sarawakian identity for people who live in Sarawak, regardless of whether they are indigenous or not.

Recommendations: The results have social implications, as they identify a key to an inclusive community centered around Sarawak indigenous popular songs, because the songs can make those who are not of Sarawak indigenous origin feel connected to the land of Sarawak. In addition, a questionnaire that is in the form of a fun quiz can be used for cultural tourism.

Research Limitation: First, the sample size was not balanced for indigenous ($n=45$) and non-indigenous ($n=64$) participants. Second, the music samples were only from the Iban, Bidayuh, Kenyah, and Melanau ethnic groups. Third, the data in this study are not adequate to hypothesize or theorize why non-lexical rhythm gives more emotional connection than lyrics in this specific context.

Future Research: Having a larger number of indigenous participants from different groups in future studies would provide a better comparison of knowledge, attitudes, and practices across indigenous groups of different population sizes. Future studies could employ an experimental design that systematically varies musical elements (e.g., rhythm-only, melody-only, lyrics-only, and combined versions) and measure emotional responses through self-reported ratings. It would also be interesting to study which combinations of musical features (rhythmic structure, language, instrumentation, performer identity) are most salient in marking a song as both indigenous and Sarawakian. Interviews could be employed so that participants could explain how they interpret rhythm and lyrics, providing deeper insight into the mechanisms behind emotional engagement. In addition, researchers could investigate whether popular songs in the national language can evoke a nationalistic spirit among citizens, taking into consideration their language backgrounds. Future studies should investigate the appeal of indigenous music so that singers, song composers, and record labels could use the findings to widen their listener bases, giving indigenous singers a better career in the music industry.

Keywords: *Indigenous music, popular music, identity, Sarawak, Malaysia*

Introduction

Popular music is a form of music that developed mainly after World War II, focused on commercial appeal, and was widely accessed through mass distribution channels (Brandellero et al., 2014). Indigenous music includes “types and styles of music such as traditional, ethnic, national, regional and folk music” (Rose, 1995, p. 39). Folk music is a sub-category of indigenous music, based on Rose’s (1995) definition, that “celebrates the people via its lyrics and rhythms. It serves as a link to the past, preserving the people’s cultural and historical identity” (Ghose, 2024, p. 316). With the rising dominance of global pop music, “folk music” (Sherefetdinova, 2024) risks losing its distinctive characteristics as it assimilates pop elements, but it is unavoidable due to broader pressures of globalisation, where smaller cultures face homogenization, cultural dilution, and challenges to identity, particularly among younger generations.

Based on the Australia Council for the Arts’ Protocols for Producing Indigenous Australian Music, Bracknell (2019) defines indigenous music as music produced by and contains musical or lyrical content derived from indigenous artists. Gibson (1998) emphasizes the deep connections between music, place, and identity. He explains the indigenous popular music of Australia using an Aboriginal song:

Lou Bennett’s “Our Home, Our Land” celebrates the act of singing itself, as an expression of their Aboriginality, and an act of empowerment: Our home is our land where we stand proud and tall. Our home is our land where we stand together. We sing our home, our home, our home. We dance our land, our land, where we stand together. (p. 178)

According to Bracknell (2019), indigenous music is not a genre of music; rather, indigenous musicians have adapted popular music genres such as folk, country, and rock (Stubington, 2007). Indigenous music blends cultural heritage with modern music production and marketing. This fusion of tradition and modernity allows indigenous communities to both preserve cultural identity and participate in global music economies. Indigenous popular music also serves as a site for negotiating identity, affirming belonging, and promoting intercultural dialogue. As such, it is not only an artistic form, but also a sociopolitical tool that reflects and shapes community values, histories, and aspirations in the face of ongoing cultural change. Fadipe and Salawu (2022) explained how Yoruba culture has been influenced by the advent of Christianity and Islam:

Also, the cultures [and] the religions themselves brought [by Christians and Muslims] have mixed with the Yoruba cultural traditions, such that they have affected their language, music, dressing, thought patterns, and so on. ... Before the advent of these two dominant religions in their socio-cultural consciousness, the primordial Yoruba people of Nigeria engaged in musical activities which involved the use of their indigenous musical instruments, ideas, and styles. (pp. 81-82)

Yoruba music is often used to communicate with the divine in ceremonies and rituals (Olaleye & Adeyeye, 2020). However, with the spread of Islam and Christianity, traditional values are interpreted with new understandings, changing how Yoruba indigenous musical practices are viewed and performed today (Fadipe & Salawu, 2022, p. 82).

The influences on indigenous music are not necessarily Western, but could come from other local cultures, as seen in the Piphat Mon ensemble of Thailand. Tassanawongwara and Hussin (2024) describe how Mon music influenced traditional Thai musical instruments, melodies, and lyrics. The Thai ensemble of wind and percussion instruments was traditionally played for court and religious events but is now also performed in educational settings (Tassanawongwara & Hussin, 2024). In cosmopolitan Bangkok, for example, the younger generation is well-connected with global communities, ideas, and practices through social media communication, leading to the adoption of global music and entertainment (Phiwhorm et al., 2024).

Frith (1996, p. 111) stresses that making music is not only about expressing ideas, but “a way of living them.” Music articulates the reality of the indigenous way of life and their values. Indigenous music has its own style, like the distinctive melody called the “iur”, an ornamentation that functions as a tone accessory, in Iban music (Ting & Djaelani, 2019). Next, musical instruments also give indigenous music its unique character. For example, Yoruba music often uses instruments such as the hourglass-shaped tension drums. The Orang Ulu people of Malaysia have a distinctive instrument called the “sape”, a lute made from a single block of wood with a hollowed back and four to five strings (2 strings in the past) (Wong, 2024).

A question that arises is whether the music of a particular indigenous group can come to symbolize a broader identity, such as a regional identity or national identity. Omibiyi-Obidike stated that it is possible, but “non-members of that culture must learn [the music] before they can appreciate and even become co-participants in its practice” (as cited in Fadipe & Salawu, 2022, p. 83). Once people who do not belong to the indigenous group become familiar with the language and music of the indigenous group, their music can have symbolic value. In the context of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 2004), indigenous music can construct an indigenous identity on a specific level for indigenous people, and a regional identity on a broader level for non-indigenous people who live in the same region and share essential qualities (Mavra & McNeil, 2007).

In Malaysia, and more specifically Borneo, a comprehensive literature review showed that there is a lack of past and recent ethnomusicology and social identity studies, except for the teaching of traditional music (e.g., Lin & Lim, 2021; Sabuk & Aziz, 2021). Thus far, in the Malaysian state of Sarawak, research has focused on a particular indigenous song, “*Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis*” of the Iban group. This song creates a sense of belonging to Sarawak and is like an anthem of unity to the 408 Sarawakians in the questionnaire study (Jerome et al., 2022a). The lyrics say “*kamek orang Sarawak*” (we are people of Sarawak) and “*nuan orang Melaya*” (you are people of Malaya), indicating the people of Sarawak

are disconnected from West Malaysia or the national context (Jerome et al., 2022b). Although “*Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis*” is an Iban pop song, it signified a Sarawakian identity for the 13 students interviewed by Sa'id et al. (2021).

Jerome et al. (2023a) attempted to identify the elements of the song that brought about its appeal and found that the lyrics are more important than the rhythm in signifying Sarawakian ethnic identity. The study involved 100 Sarawakians, who perceived Sarawak indigenous popular music as songs that feature musical elements from Sarawak ethnic groups, use indigenous languages of Sarawak, and portray the lifestyle and cultures of Sarawak indigenous groups, but not all three elements need to be present for a song to qualify as an indigenous pop song. However, Jerome et al.'s (2023a) study did not separate the views of indigenous and non-indigenous participants to understand how non-indigenous people feel about indigenous music. Most studies on Sarawak indigenous songs focus on “*Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis*”; it is not known whether other indigenous pop songs can evoke a shared sense of belonging to Sarawak. As there is a lack of Sarawak-specific research and of such research in Malaysia, the present study is timely and crucial to understand whether pop songs belonging to an indigenous group can signify the state identity for all those who live in the region.

Purposes of the Study

The study investigated the views of Sarawak indigenous participants and other Sarawakians on whether Sarawak indigenous popular music can create an indigenous and regional identity. The specific objectives of the study were to compare:

- 1) their level of familiarity with and knowledge about Sarawak indigenous popular music,
- 2) their attitudes towards Sarawak indigenous popular music, and
- 3) their practices in listening to Sarawak indigenous popular music.

Sociocultural Background on Sarawak Indigenous Music

The indigenous groups in Sarawak, a Malaysian state on the island of Borneo, are native to the land. The indigenous groups make up 48.2% of the Sarawak population of 2.5 million compared to the Malay (22.3%) and Chinese (25.3%) (Dayak Today, 2025). The Iban is the largest group (28.9% or 723,000), followed by the Bidayuh (8% or 201,000). Other indigenous groups are smaller, like the Melanau (5.6% or 140,000) and the Orang Ulu (5.7% or 143,000). The Orang Ulu encompasses the Kayan, Kenyah, Kedayan, Lun Bawang, Penan, Bisaya, Kelabit, and Kajang groups living in northern Sarawak.

Indigenous music helps in transmission of folklores, values, and beliefs, thus reinforcing a sense of identity and unity within a culture. Indigenous songs are usually in the indigenous language and have original lyrics and music compositions. Occasionally, indigenous popular music is a translation of songs in other languages. An example is the Iban song “*Kini Ka Nuan Pegi*” (Where did you go?) by Michael Jemat, released in 2008. It was translated from Teresa Teng's Chinese song “*Wo ai de ni, ni zai na li ya, zai na li*” (I love you, where are you, where are you) and is sung to the same tune (Ting et al., 2023).

Next, indigenous popular music carries values such as cultural heritage and ethnic pride, particularly for Sarawak indigenous groups. A classic example is an Iban song by Andrewson Ngalai entitled “*Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis*,” which is often sung in wedding celebrations and Gawai festivals. It is played so often that most Sarawakians are familiar with it, and can sing the chorus (“*Ooooha satu, dua, taruh; taruh, taruh, ooooha*” (meaning “one, two, put/place, put/place” (Jerome et al., 2022b).

Method of the Study

This descriptive study involved 109 participants comprising 41.28% (or 45) Sarawak Indigenous and 58.72% (or 64) other Sarawakians. The term “Sarawakian” refers to Malaysian citizens born in Sarawak. The online questionnaire link was given to participants who fulfilled the selection criteria: (a) Malaysians who are Sarawakians but may be living elsewhere at some point in their lives; and (b) Participants who were aged 18 and above, so parental consent was not required for participating in the study, but there was no age limit. In this study, “Sarawak indigenous” refers to Iban, Bidayuh,

Melanau, and Orang Ulu, while “Other Sarawakians” who are non-indigenous refer to Malay, Chinese, Indian, and indigenous from other states in Malaysia (e.g., Kadazan-Dusun from Sabah).

Table 1 shows that there were more female participants (62.39%) and that there was a spread of age groups. Most participants (77.98%) had lived in Sarawak almost their whole lives, but 15.60% came back to live in Sarawak after living somewhere else. It is common for Sarawakians to study or work in other parts of Malaysia or in other countries but return to their homeland when there are job opportunities. Only 8.26% lived most of their lives outside of Sarawak, and .92% lived in Sarawak when they were young but now live elsewhere. However, the study did not have an equal number of Sarawakians living within and outside the state. Therefore, residence could not be meaningfully analysed as a factor that might influence attachment to indigenous music.

Table 1 Demographic Background of Participants (n=109)

Demographic Background	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Ethnic group	Sarawak Indigenous	45	41.28
	Non-indigenous Sarawakians – Malay	32	29.36
	Chinese	20	18.35
	Indian	2	1.83
	Others	10	9.17
Age	19 and below	1	.92
	20-29 years old	29	26.61
	30-39 years old	23	21.10
	40-49 years old	40	36.70
	50-59 years old	12	11.01
	60 and above	4	3.67
Gender	Female	68	62.39
	Male	41	37.61
Residence	Lived in Sarawak almost my whole life	85	77.98
	Came back to live in Sarawak after living somewhere else	17	15.60
	Lived most of my life outside of Sarawak	9	8.26
	Lived in Sarawak when I was young but now live elsewhere	1	.92

Note: Indigenous participants comprised 23 Iban, 17 Bidayuh, 3 Melanau, 2 Orang Ulu, 9 Others

The questionnaire was self-constructed as there were no similar existing questionnaires. The 18-item questionnaire on knowledge, attitudes, and practices relating to Sarawak indigenous popular music comprised demographic information (five items), knowledge on Sarawak indigenous music (eight items), attitudes towards Sarawak indigenous music (three items), and practices relating to Sarawak indigenous music (two items).

The scale for measuring knowledge of Sarawak indigenous popular music comprised two types of items. Firstly, for familiarity with indigenous songs or dance music (five items), the participants were asked to click on a one-minute link, listen to the audio clip, and guess the title, singer, or language of the music (see Table 2 for brief information about the four songs and one dance music). Secondly, for knowledge about the songs and songwriters (three items), the items gauged knowledge of the historical background of the indigenous music industry (see Table 4 for items). We intentionally did not study “*Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis*” because the attitudes and perceptions towards this Iban song have been extensively studied (e.g., Jerome et al., 2022a, 2023b).

Next, the scale for attitudes towards Sarawak indigenous popular music comprised three items, two of which were about identity (“What is it about an indigenous popular song that makes you feel the most Sarawakian?” “Is listening to indigenous music an important part of being a Sarawakian?”). The third item was about feelings elicited by listening to indigenous songs (see Table 5 for items). To take account of participants who have no affective engagement with the songs, another option was given: “I don’t feel anything special because it is just a song.” Finally, for practices in listening to Sarawak

indigenous popular music, participants were asked about their reactions and their frequency of listening to indigenous songs.

Table 2 Brief Information About the Four Songs and One Dance Music

Song/ Title	Language/Group	Brief Description (Style, Musical Features, Context)
Redak Seribu	Iban	Rock genre. Song by Masterpiece. Features a recognisable guitar melody and a steady, danceable rhythm characteristic of modern Iban music.
Berperang dalam petang	Iban	Rock genre. First popularised by Winnie Albert. Features a recognisable guitar melody, creating a meditative and sentimental mood.
Nyaboh la la hey	Bidayuh	Pop/ballad genre. First popularised by Mike Rantai. Can be played along with guitar, ukulele, or piano. Sung during the Gawai rice harvest festival, this song features a danceable rhythm.
Leleng	Kenyah	Folk genre. Features traditional melody. Dance features circular movements, symbolising unity and the cyclical nature of life. It is traditionally performed during communal gatherings. "Leleng" is often accompanied by the sape (pronounced sa-peh), a traditional boat-shaped lute integral to Kenyah music (Lew, 2025).
Alu alu	Melanau	A traditional Melanau mourning or healing chant (depending on region). The Alu Alu dance, performed by four men and six women, uses everyday Melanau actions, with movements inspired by work, healing, play, and even dreams (Pemetaanbudaya, 2025). The alu alu music is played to the clicking sound of two bamboo sticks hitting each other. The dancers have to skip between two bamboo sticks.

Note: No academic publications providing information on these indigenous songs, so other sources were used.

A pilot test was conducted for questionnaire validation involving seven participants. The first and second researchers sat with the participants as they filled in the questionnaire to pay attention to any queries that they might have. The questions were clear and not ambiguous. After the pilot study, the alu-alu dance music was included to cover more indigenous groups. The item added to the questionnaire was: (Click here) Listen to the music and guess whose dance music this is: Iban, Melanau, Bidayuh, Kayan, Kelabit, Kedayan, Kenyah, Bisaya, Lunbawang, or Penan.

Ethics clearance for the study on indigenous music was obtained from the university (JKEUPM(FEM-P160)2017). Potential participants were told about the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, confidentiality and anonymity of responses, and freedom to withdraw at any point in the study. They gave their informed consent before filling in the online survey. The Quizmaker link (<https://take.quizmaker.com/QE9RYUHGO>) was shared with contacts who were asked to share the link with others.

An Excel worksheet containing the data was downloaded and filtered for missing responses. The data comprised the initial 112 responses that were filtered, and three incomplete responses were deleted, leaving 109 for the analysis. The data were coded and descriptive statistics were computed (mean, frequency) to compare the two groups on knowledge, attitudes, and practices related to Sarawak indigenous popular music. The frequencies in the table were calculated as follows:

$$\frac{\text{Number of Participants Who Guessed the Song Correctly} \times 100\%}{\text{Total Number of Participants}} =$$

To calculate the results shown in Table 3, the participants' scores for the five knowledge items were averaged before calculating the percentage of their knowledge.

Results

This section describes the results on familiarity with Sarawak indigenous popular music (Objective 1), attitudes towards Sarawak indigenous popular music (Objective 2), and practices in listening to Sarawak indigenous music (Objective 3). In this section, participants are referred to as Sarawak indigenous participants and non-indigenous participants (which includes Malay, Chinese, and Indian living in Sarawak).

Familiarity with Sarawak Indigenous Popular Music

Table 3 shows the frequencies and percentages of participants correctly identifying Sarawak indigenous popular music. The percentage of Sarawak indigenous participants (48.44%) correctly identifying the Sarawak indigenous popular music was larger than that of non-indigenous participants (42.82%). This result was expected because Sarawak indigenous people should be more familiar with their own music.

Table 3 Frequencies/Percentages of Participants Correctly Identifying Sarawak Indigenous Popular Music

Familiarity With Item	Indigenous (n=45)		Non-Indigenous (n=64)		Overall (n=109)	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Guess the title of the song (Redak Seribu)	34	75.56%	34	53.13%	68	62.39%
Guess the singer of the song (Winnie Albert)	27	60.00%	28	43.75%	55	50.46%
Guess the first singer of the song (Mike Rantai)	24	53.33%	40	62.50%	64	58.72%
Guess the language of the song (Kenyah)	9	20.00%	18	28.13%	27	24.77%
Guess the dance music (Melanau)	15	33.33%	17	26.56%	32	29.36%
Averages	21.8	48.44%	27.40	42.82%	45.14	49.20%

The song that participants knew the most was the Iban song "Redak Seribu", as it was correctly identified by 62.39% of the participants. More Sarawak indigenous participants (75.56%) were familiar with the song than non-indigenous participants (53.13%). In Spotify's Top and Trending Iban songs, Top 92 lagu Iban tracks, "Redak Seribu" is the first of the older indigenous popular songs to appear after the newer songs (<https://www.chosic.com/genre-chart/lagu-iban/tracks/>).

The participants were somewhat familiar with the singer of the song entitled "Berperang dalam petang" ("Fighting in the Afternoon"), Winnie Albert. Overall, 50.46% of the participants correctly guessed the singer (Sarawak indigenous, 60%; non-indigenous, 43.75%). Winnie Albert has performed all over Sarawak for the past 34 years (Thomas Mamora, 2022). She is better known for the song "Besi Ganti Nuan." Recently, a video clip of her impromptu singing of Siti Nurhaliza's hit tune "Percayalah" (Believe) at an eatery in Kuching, Sarawak, went viral on TikTok after a fan from West Malaysia posted it, and she received invitations from local recording companies, giving her a break in her music career (Thomas-Mamora, 2022). As is common for Sarawak indigenous singers, Winnie Albert not only sings Iban songs, but also English and Malay songs.

As for familiarity with Mike Rantai, who first popularised "nyaboh la la hey", overall 58.72% of participants made a correct guess after listening to the one-minute audio clip of the song. However, the Sarawak indigenous participants (53.33%) were less familiar with it than the non-indigenous participants (62.50%). Mike Rantai is a Bidayuh artist (David, 2022) and won the Anugerah Muzik Dayak

2010 (The Borneo Post, 2010). The “La La Hey” chorus has a catchy melody that might have captured the non-indigenous participants' attention.

In the same way, the Sarawak indigenous participants (20%) also were less familiar than the non-indigenous participants in recognising the language of the Kenyah song, “Leleng” (28.13%). “Leleng” (meaning turn around) used to be performed only at Orang Ulu longhouses during weddings and official ceremonies along the Baram and Tinjar rivers. “Leleng” is almost like the anthem of the Kenyah people and is played on the sape, a wooden lute. In the past, women were not allowed to play sape for fear of bringing bad luck, but Alena Murang was the first woman to play sape professionally.

The Melanau dance music “alu alu” is not well-known, as only 29.36% of the participants (overall) could correctly identify it as Melanau music (Sarawak indigenous, 33.33%; non-indigenous, 26.56%). Traditionally known as mourning music, “alu alu” is played for entertainment nowadays.

Next, Table 4 shows weak knowledge about the historical background of the Iban music industry. Overall, only 36.09% of the participants could give correct answers to the three items, but surprisingly, non-indigenous participants (37.5%) knew the history slightly better than Sarawak indigenous participants (34.07%). Interestingly, a substantial percentage of participants (overall 57.80%) knew when Iban songs were first played on RTM radio, which was in the 1960s. Fewer participants (overall 33.94%) knew that the people who first sang the popular Iban songs on RTM radio were two daughters of an influential Iban family, Seniorita and Pauline Linang. The Linang sisters were household names among Iban radio listeners during the 1950s and 1960s. However, neither of them was ever signed by a recording company to produce Iban vinyl records. Few (overall 16.51%) knew that Iban music was commercialized in the 1970s. That was when more Iban singers gained popularity and more Iban songs were played over the radio.

Table 4 Knowledge About Sarawak Indigenous Popular Music

Item	Indigenous (n=45)		Non-Indigenous (n=64)		Overall (n=109)	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
When were Iban songs first played on RTM radio? (1960s)	15	33.33%	22	34.38%	63	57.80%
Who first sang the popular Iban songs on RTM radio? (Seniorita and Pauline Linang)	7	15.56%	11	17.19%	37	33.94%
When was Iban music commercialized? (1970s)	24	53.33%	39	60.94%	18	16.51%
Averages	15.33	34.07%	24	37.50%	39.33	36.09%

Attitudes Towards Sarawak Indigenous Popular Music

Table 5 shows that the frequencies and percentages of attitudes towards Sarawak indigenous popular music were similar among Sarawak indigenous and non-indigenous participants. First, participants were asked what it is about an indigenous song that makes them feel the most Sarawakian. The results were clear: it was the beat/rhythm that carries the Sarawakian identity (overall 55.05%), followed by the indigenous language (overall 24.77%), and the content of the song about the everyday life of Sarawakians (overall 13.76%). An indigenous singer was the least likely to elicit a reaction of Sarawakian identity (overall 6.42%). Radio listeners in Sarawak may not pay full attention to the content of the Sarawak indigenous songs, unlike González’s (2021) study in Spain. Her study showed that 72.8% of 280 university students reported that they remembered songs by the lyrics, but her study was not about songs and identity. The present findings build on Jerome et al.’s (2023a) findings, which were about the characteristics of the songs. They found that the lifestyles and cultures, musical elements, and the language give the songs Sarawakian characteristics (in descending order of importance). The present study goes further to discover which characteristics creates a state identity for the participants, and musical elements topped the list. Putting the results of the present study and Jerome et al. (2023a) together, it can be surmised that Sarawakian content is not as effective as the beat/rhythm in symbolizing the state identity.

Table 5 Frequency and Percentage Showing Attitudes Towards Sarawak Indigenous Popular Music

Items	Category	Indigenous (n=45)		Non-Indigenous (n=64)		Overall (n=109)	
		Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
What is it about an indigenous popular song that makes you feel the most Sarawakian?							
The beat/rhythm is unique to Sarawak indigenous music		23	51.11	37	57.81	60	55.05%
The song is in an indigenous language		12	26.67	15	23.44	27	24.77%
The song reflects the everyday life of Sarawakians		6	13.33	9	14.06	15	13.76%
The singer is from an indigenous group		4	8.89	3	4.69	7	6.42%
Is listening to indigenous music an important part of being a Sarawakian?							
Very Important		19	42.22	33	51.56	52	47.71%
Somewhat Important		22	48.89	27	42.19	49	44.95%
Not Important		4	8.89	4	6.25	8	7.34%
How do you feel when you listen to an indigenous song?							
I am glad that the life of Sarawakians is represented through indigenous music		36	80.00	41	64.06	77	70.64%
I feel happy that Sarawak indigenous songs are gaining recognition		34	75.56	40	62.50	74	67.89%
I feel happy that Sarawak indigenous people are making music		31	68.89	39	60.94	70	64.22%
I am glad to be associated with the indigenous people of Sarawak		23	51.11	27	42.19	50	45.87%
I don't feel anything special because it is just a song		3	6.67	2	3.13	5	4.59%

The ranking was the same for both groups of participants, but the percentages were relatively higher for indigenous languages and singers, showing the identification of Sarawak indigenous participants with these two cultural identity markers. On the other hand, percentages were relatively higher for beat/rhythm and Sarawakian content for non-indigenous participants, indicating their attention to the music. Young (2023), who researches Cree music and is Cree-Métis himself, states:

For indigenous people, our language defines who we are, what we believe, and what we practice and deem essential to our way of knowing; thus, traditional languages are highly regarded by Indigenous people, and to lose them would erase our cultural identity, causing virulent effects within our communities. (p. 44)

Other states in Malaysia have their respective uniqueness in music and language and may hold similar appeal to people living there. That is why indigenous people who live outside of Sarawak feel nostalgic about their home state when they hear the sape music being played (Sarawak Focus, 2021).

Second, participants were asked whether listening to indigenous music is an important part of being a Sarawakian. More non-indigenous participants (51.56%) felt that it is very important, compared to Sarawak indigenous participants (42.22%). To 48.89% of Sarawak indigenous participants, it is somewhat important, compared to 42.19% for non-indigenous participants. The results show that while both groups value indigenous music as part of Sarawakian identity, it functions more as a symbolic marker of Sarawakian identity for non-indigenous participants. For indigenous participants who are already embedded in their own cultural practices, indigenous music may be seen as a familiar part of daily life rather than something that defines identity.

Finally, the participants were asked how they felt when they listened to an indigenous song. Table 5 shows that Sarawak indigenous participants have stronger feelings and take greater pride in indigenous singers and their music than non-indigenous participants. Representation of Sarawakian life in the indigenous music gave the greatest joy (overall 70.64%), followed by recognition of Sarawak indigenous songs (overall 67.89%) and Sarawak indigenous musicians (overall 64.22%). These feelings are shaped by newspaper discourse, which laments the poor career prospects of indigenous singers (e.g., David, 2022; Thomas-Mamora, 2022). Hence, participants acknowledged the achievements of the indigenous singers and their songs. About half of the participants (45.87% overall) were glad to be associated with the indigenous people of Sarawak. Only 4.59% (overall) did not feel anything special because it is just a song. The finding with which the largest percentage of participants agreed on the representation of Sarawakian life was like that of Jerome et al. (2023a). In their survey of 100 Sarawakians, the largest proportion of participants (84%) also felt that indigenous songs reflect the lifestyles and cultures of indigenous groups in Sarawak. The content of the Sarawak indigenous songs was important for a song to be considered a Sarawak indigenous song. Among early Sarawak indigenous songs, “*Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis*” created the Sarawakian identity by contrasting it with the West Malaysian identity (Jerome et al., 2022a).

Practices of Listening to Sarawak Indigenous Popular Music

Table 6 shows the frequencies and percentages for practices of listening to Sarawak indigenous popular music were very different for Sarawak indigenous and non-indigenous participants.

Table 6 Frequency and Percentage Showing Practices of Listening to Sarawak Indigenous Popular Music

Items	Category	Indigenous (n=45)		Non-Indigenous (n=64)		Overall (n=109)	
		Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
How often do you listen to indigenous music?	Not At All	7	15.56	25	39.06	32	29.36%
	1-2 Times/Week	19	42.22	29	45.31	48	44.04%
	3-5 Times/Week	7	15.56	5	7.81	12	11.01%
	Almost Everyday	12	26.67	5	7.81	17	15.60%
When you listen to an indigenous song, what do you do?	I listen only	22	48.89	42	65.63	64	58.72%
	I recognize that it is an indigenous song	29	64.44	30	46.88	59	54.13%
	I sing along	28	62.22	13	20.31	41	37.61%
	I start tapping my feet	24	53.33	24	37.50	48	44.04%
	I dance	12	26.67	9	14.06	21	19.27%

Sarawak indigenous participants listened to indigenous music frequently, operationalized as “almost every day” (26.67%) and 3-5 times per week (15.56%). For non-indigenous participants, it was 7.81% and 7.81% respectively, indicating that they do not have a habit of listening to indigenous music. The results for completely not listening to indigenous music reinforced this result (Sarawak indigenous, 15.56%; non-indigenous, 39.06%). Non-indigenous participants may have other music interests as they do not belong to the Sarawak indigenous groups. In the past, people tuned in to indigenous radio programmes at set times of the day, whether in the house or in the car. Nowadays, people listen to indigenous music on their telephones, computers, and other devices. It has become more convenient to listen to music, and these results are relevant for radio broadcasting stations and recording companies to gauge the state of the indigenous music industry. There is certainly a need to increase the listener base because the percentage of participants listening to indigenous music almost every day is too low for a thriving indigenous music industry.

The second item (“When you listen to an indigenous song, what do you do?”) gauged the engagement level when listening to Sarawak indigenous music. Sarawak indigenous participants were deeply engaged: dancing along (26.67%), tapping their feet (53.33%), and singing along (62.22%). Fewer of the non-indigenous participants did these things (14.06%, 37.50%, and 20.31%, respectively). In fact, 65.53% of them only listened and did not engage with the songs through participatory acts. For

46.88% of the non-indigenous participants, the engagement was at a cognitive level, that is, they recognized the song as indigenous. For Sarawak indigenous participants, almost all who recognized a song as indigenous also sang along with it. These embodied responses suggest that music functions not only as a cultural symbol, but also as a performative space where identity is enacted and reinforced. The present study was from a listener's perspective, but Udaya (2017) studied this from the indigenous musician's perspective. In Russia, Udaya (2017) revealed that the three musicians interviewed intentionally expressed a collective Sámi and Tuvan identity in their musical practices, performances, and lyrics to affirm their heritage. Taken together, the two findings suggest that identity expression in indigenous music is not limited to performers. In Sarawak, it is also visible in listeners' bodily reactions, which function as every day, unselfconscious affirmations of belonging.

Discussion

Two key results about knowledge, attitudes, and practices related to Sarawak indigenous popular music are discussed.

First, the findings on the practices show that for Sarawak indigenous participants, listening to Sarawak indigenous music is habitual and physically engaging. The indigenous participants enjoy listening to indigenous popular songs, as it is their music and reiterates their indigenous identity. They may listen to indigenous songs when driving or relaxing with family and friends. In contrast, the non-indigenous participants seldom move and sing along when indigenous songs are played. Nevertheless, they attribute symbolic value to the indigenous songs, which connect them to the land of Sarawak. In the present study, some indigenous participants frequently listen to indigenous music, but they may come from families where there are mixed marriages with indigenous people. This is because Ting et al. (2023) found that Iban individuals whose parents are both Iban can sing Iban songs better than those who have only one Iban parent. Children raised in households where Iban music is regularly played and valued are more likely to continue those listening practices and associate them with cultural pride. Outside of the home, Iban pop songs are often played; a finding from Jerome et al.'s (2022a) survey of 408 participants showed that they regularly listened to Iban pop songs through the radio and social media platforms for leisure with family and friends, and during special occasions. Nevertheless, 80.39% had attended less than five social events where Iban pop songs were performed. It also needs to be noted that their findings were mostly based on the perspective of Iban participants from urban settings.

The differences in the indigenous music practices of indigenous and non-indigenous participants are novel findings because other related studies did not distinguish the indigeneity of the participants, but treated them as one group (e.g., Jerome et al., 2022a; 2022b, 2023a). This differentiation reveals that indigenous music practices are not uniformly shared by all Sarawakians, but are shaped by cultural belonging, family transmission, and everyday exposure. Treating Sarawakians as a single category obscures important differences due to ethnic backgrounds.

Second, Sarawak indigenous popular music can represent and construct a Sarawakian, or regional identity, anchored to the shared experience of living in the state for indigenous and non-indigenous participants alike. A recurring theme that emerged from Jerome et al.'s (2022b) interviews with five local music enthusiasts was that "*Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis*" brings up images of various races gathering at public events, a unique characteristic of Sarawakians who have lived together for so long. Omibiyi-Obidike (2007) emphasized that shared musical experiences contribute to a collective consciousness in multi-ethnic societies. This is observable in Sarawak, where indigenous songs like "*Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis*" transcend ethnic boundaries, uniting fellow Sarawakians and creating a sense of belonging to Sarawak (Jerome, 2022b). Similarly, Mavra and McNeil (2007) argued that the sharing of essential qualities (whether real, imagined, or performed) enables people living in the same space to identify with one another and form overlapping social identities. Based on this, the Sarawakian identity may encompass affective connections to indigenous music, even for non-indigenous individuals.

Next, the discussion turns to the elements of the Sarawak indigenous music that create the Sarawakian identity. In the present study, both groups believed that it was rhythm rather than lyrics

(content) that evokes the Sarawakian spirit, contradicting Jerome et al. (2023a), whose participants ranked lyrics first, followed by rhythm/beat (e.g., melody, instrumentation), and then singing and dancing. Whether it is the findings of the present study or those of Jerome et al. (2023a), the two musical signifiers of indigeneity in Sarawak are rhythm and lyrics. Similar findings were obtained by Udaya (2017) in Russia. The Sámi and Tuvan musicians weaved local language, traditional rhythms, and indigenous worldviews into indigenous music, both an act of cultural resistance and a means of constructing a trans local indigenous identity. Indigenous languages, themes related to land, ancestry, and traditional instruments are central to expressing identity in Aboriginal music from Australia and Māori music from New Zealand (Wilson, 2010).

Based on these past findings, it is not surprising that the Sarawakian participants did not think that the indigenous background of the singer is sufficient to evoke the Sarawakian identity. This means that Chinese and Malays can sing the indigenous popular songs with the same effect. Similarly, in Minang pop music of the Minangkabau in Indonesia, Tan (2014) emphasized how the music aims to evoke *risau* (anxious sadness) and *parasaih* (longing) through lyrical figurativeness and mood-setting instrumentation. There is no mention of the indigenous background of the singers as a meaningful component of regional belonging. The Sarawakian identity may be more open and hybrid, where identity is less tightly bound to linguistic or ethnic markers, and can be expressed through music that evokes a sense of belonging to the state.

Conclusion

This study on the views of Sarawakian indigenous and non-indigenous participants shows that Sarawak indigenous popular music can construct both an indigenous and a regional identity. Both groups are moderately familiar with Sarawak indigenous popular music and the historical background of the indigenous music industry. Both groups have positive attitudes towards Sarawak indigenous popular music in symbolising a Sarawakian identity. However, 85% of the Sarawak indigenous participants have a habit of listening to the songs at least a few times a week, but only 60% of non-indigenous Sarawakians do so. The new finding is that Sarawak indigenous music embodies the state identity for Sarawakians, indicating that they live together in a shared geographical space, regardless of whether they are indigenous or not.

Nevertheless, the study had three limitations. First, the sample size was not balanced for indigenous ($n=45$) and non-indigenous ($n=64$) participants. In the study, more participants correctly identified Iban and Bidayuh music than Kenyah and Melanau music, but it was not certain whether this was due to the slightly larger number of Iban participants. Indigenous participants comprised 23 Iban, 17 Bidayuh, three Melanau, two Orang Ulu, and nine other Sarawak indigenous groups. Nevertheless, the proportion of Iban participants was not overwhelmingly large compared to Jerome et al. (2023b), where Iban people accounted for 73% of the participants. Having a larger number of indigenous participants from different groups in future studies would provide a better comparison of knowledge, attitudes, and practices across indigenous groups of different population sizes.

Second, the music samples were only for Iban, Bidayuh, Kenyah, and Melanau. The music of all other indigenous groups in Sarawak could not be included in the interest of keeping the questionnaire short, as questionnaires that are too long would reduce willingness to participate. This was an important consideration because the five audio clips were about 1 minute each. Third, the data in this study were not adequate to hypothesize or theorize why non-lexical rhythm gives more emotional connection than lyrics in this specific context. Future studies could employ an experimental design that systematically varies musical elements (e.g., rhythm-only, melody-only, lyrics-only, and combined versions) and measures emotional responses through self-report ratings. It would also be interesting to study which combinations of musical features (rhythmic structure, language, instrumentation, performer identity) are most salient in marking a song as both indigenous and Sarawakian. Interviews could also be employed so that participants can explain how they interpret rhythm and lyrics, providing deeper insight into the mechanisms behind emotional engagement.

This study has implications for research into music and identity. Knowing and liking Sarawak indigenous music can be considered a marker of the Sarawakian identity, and this is an aspect that has escaped the attention of researchers studying the culture of places with a large indigenous population. Thus far, the focus has been on language, traditions, cuisine, and costumes as markers of identity, such as Ting and Campbell (2013), who found that the Bidayuh consider parentage, language, and the Gawai (harvest) celebration their identity markers. As for national identity, the ability to sing the national anthem is the top defining characteristic of being Malaysian (Ting, 2016). For Sarawakian identity, the Iban song, “*Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis*”, can symbolize a Sarawakian identity and evoke patriotism (Jerome et al., 2022a). For the research area of music and identity to break new ground, it is important for researchers to study modern trending music and move away from the classics, which have been overstudied and may not be relevant to the younger generation. In addition, researchers can investigate whether popular songs in the national language can evoke a nationalistic spirit among citizens, taking into consideration their language backgrounds.

The results have social implications as they identify a key to an inclusive community centred around Sarawak indigenous popular songs, because the songs can make those who are not of Sarawak indigenous origin feel connected to the land of Sarawak. In addition, a questionnaire that is in the form of a fun quiz can be used for cultural tourism. Tourists can try it to have a local music experience and find out how much they know about Sarawak indigenous music. However, the present study focused only on the value or significance of Sarawak indigenous popular music but did not investigate the appeal of the songs to listeners. Future studies should investigate the appeal of indigenous music so that singers, song composers, and record labels can use the findings to widen their listener bases, giving indigenous singers better careers in the music industry.

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Author Contributions

Su-Hie Ting: Conceptualisation, methodology, validation, investigation, formal analysis, data curation, writing, review and editing; **Collin Jerome:** Conceptualisation, methodology, investigation, funding acquisition, project administration, visualisation, writing, review and editing; **Connie Keh Nie Lim:** Methodology, investigation, review and editing.

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