



**Manuscript Title:** 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

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**Accepted Date:** 13-January-2021

**Please cite this article as:** Collin Jerome, Ting Su-Hie and EstherJohn Perry. 2021. 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* (early view).

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**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**

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**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 examined 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 different 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", "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 various 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's attention, 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 difficult 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 in the Eyes of the World* by Ella that carry messages of unity and patriotism are well recognized among many Malaysians (Adil and Shazlin, 2019). The latter is much loved and will always be remembered as a song that stirs great nationalistic pride among Malaysians, long after it premiered at the country's hosting of the Commonwealth Games in 1998 (Adil and Shazlin, 2019).

While there has been extensive research on these "commercially produced popular songs that carry a patriotic message or theme" *alongside* Malaysia's

popular patriotic songs that promote national unity (Adil and Shazlin, 2019: 183), the focus has been more on songs that are written and sung in Malay, the country's official national language. This comes as no surprise if we consider the long-held national policy on the Malay language as a means for shaping national identity and achieving national integration in a multiracial, multiethnic, and multicultural society (Gill, 2014; Sercombe and Tupas, 2014.). However, popular songs that are commercially produced by the country's indigenous ethnic communities, and are sung in their respective languages also play a potential role in achieving the same goal. *Lagu pop Iban* (Iban pop song) is a case in point. Since its inception in the 1950s, the Ibans that make up the largest indigenous ethnic group in Sarawak have produced various popular music genres that cater to a large and ever-growing audience. While many Iban pop songs deal with common themes of everyday life, some songs express unity and patriotism. These include *Tanah Ai Menoa Aku* (My country's land and water/My Fatherland) by Connie Francis and *Oh Malaysia* by Hillary Tawan (Postill, 2006), *Agi Idup Agi Ngelaban* (Still Alive, Still Fighting) by Christopher Kelly and *Malaysia Baru* (New Malaysia) by Myra Esther Adam (Lim, Durin, Chelum, and Wagiman 2016; Lim, Yow, Durin, and Chelum, 2018) to name a few.

But the song, *Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis* (trans: to have one's leg shaved/ lit: go above and beyond/ go to extremes), deserves special mention here. This non-patriotic Iban pop song, which tells a man's relentless pursuit of his lady love and sung in the *mejeng* style, has garnered immense popularity among diverse audiences: from the multiethnic listeners in Sarawak to fans in Sabah, Brunei, Indonesia, and West Malaysia. These audiences (especially those from Sarawak) associate the song with notions of local identity, unity, and belonging through their verbal responses to the song: "team Sarawak"; "Aku Melayu Sarawak pun minat lagu ni, "Sabah Sarawak adik-beradik"; "cukup terbilang dalam menua Sarawak" (buahemperingat, n.d.). Some have even given it an unofficial status of being "the second" or "the other" Sarawak national anthem (Langet, 2019), thus fortifying the song's ability to unite the people in Sarawak and beyond. The song became so popular that the former Deputy Chief Minister of Sarawak, Tan Sri Alfred Jabu used the song for a political campaign, with slight modifications done on the title and lyrics. The modified song was played at the National Gawai Dayak Celebration and the National Day Celebration in 2012 (Langet, 2019).

Bearing this observation in mind, one is tempted to ask: how do commercially produced, non-patriotic popular songs by Malaysia's indigenous ethnic community help create visions of unity and belonging among Malaysians? What kinds of vision are they, and how do these visions enable us to rethink the ways we view the 'grand' or 'official' narratives of unity and belonging in present-day Malaysia? Before we address these questions, let us begin with a brief review of

related literature, followed by a description of the methods used in examining the connection between popular music and people's visions of unity and belonging.

## POPULAR MUSIC AND VISIONS OF UNITY AND BELONGING

Popular music serves as an important resource for the construction of people's visions of unity and belonging. This is attested to by numerous scholars in the field of popular music studies (e.g., Avelar and Dunn, 2011; Morra, 2014), who posit that popular music affects how ordinary people feel about unity and their sense of inclusion within a community, a particular place, a region or a country.

The most obvious, current example of this is the global rise of K-Pop that manages to unite and connect diverse audiences the world over mainly through their "shared love of (K-Pop) music and cultural diversity" (Zhou, 2019). Of course, this does not discount the existence of popular music genres from other parts of the world that have had a much longer presence and influence in our lives. British popular music or Britpop, as Morra (2014: 34) posits, is regarded as a significant marker of a "British 'national' identity" that has an impact on people's sense of belonging to the community and country. These notions of identity and 'we feelings', however, are constructed based on exclusive assumptions of the people, their values, and essential identity (Morra, 2014). This is so, given that the British popular music tradition that continues to originate from (and assume) a predominantly White, indigenous demographic with the non-Whites and others are often pushed to the periphery (Adams, 2013).

A somewhat similar pattern can be seen in popular music genres across the continent, including Thailand's *pleng lukgrung* (urban music), *pleng lukthung* (country music), *pleng puea chiwit* (life song), and *pleng string* (young urban music). Lamnao Eamsa-Ard (2006) maintains that these popular Thai music genres not only represent the different visions of Thai identity and Thainess but also exemplify the different visions of unity and belonging among the Thai people. *Pleng lukgrung* and *pleng lukthung* promote the officially-defined Thai identity marked by the three pillars of Thainess (i.e., the King, the nation, and religion). *Pleng puea chiwit* promulgates a Thai identity that embodies people's basic rights while *pleng string* represents an essentially modern, urban, and youth-oriented Thainess. This can be seen through its blend of Western music style (e.g., rock, rap, hip-hop) and Thai local music and themes (e.g., helpfulness/*nam jai*; friendship/*mitraparp*; concern/*kwan huangyai*) (Lamnao Eamsa-Ard, 2006: 200).

Research has shown that Malaysian popular music plays an important role in creating people's sense of national identity, unity, and belonging. Contemporary Malaysian popular songs, particularly those that evoke feelings of pride and

patriotism, have been found to exert a considerable effect on the realization of national unity and togetherness, and the creation of national pride and identity among Malaysians. Adil and Shazlin (2019) affirm this thesis in their study that explored Malaysian popular music consumption and its connection to social cohesion. The study revealed that "patriotic songs that are produced in a commercial style of mass consumption are the most well-recognized and well-received. And, these songs also foster a sense of collective identity amongst Malaysians across their individual differences" (Adil and Shazlin, 2019: 191). While acknowledging the value of the study's findings and its "the pioneering nature" (Adil and Shazlin, 2019: 190), it should be noted that these researchers will further scrutinize the validity and the applicability of their results concerning the hypothesis that Malaysian popular music is a vector of social cohesion among the country's diverse population.

Another important point to consider is the study's purposive use of popular Malay songs. The participants were asked to listen and respond to these songs following their knowledge, preferences, and experiences (Adil and Shazlin, 2019). Given the diverse range of popular music genres produced in Malaysia for local, regional, and even international mass markets, one is tempted to ask whether popular songs that are written and sung in the languages of the country's indigenous ethnic communities can play a potential role in achieving the same goal of creating people's visions of togetherness and inclusion. If popular music genres by, for example, the indigenous people of America can afford both indigenous and non-indigenous audiences the ability to "think critically, stand strong and engage in understanding tribal points of view" on matters concerning "resistance," "survival," and "unity" (Lee, 2016: 62), we may speak similarly about popular music genres produced by our country's indigenous ethnic communities. The Iban pop song, *Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis*, is a good case in point. Its immense popularity compels us to rethink the way we view this non-Malay and non-patriotic popular song concerning its ability to engender visions of solidarity and attachment among its diverse audiences.

To substantiate this assertion, the study presented in this article gathered the views of present-day Malaysians (e.g., the general public, individuals, groups, and organizations operating within the local music industry) about popular music genres of indigenous ethnic communities in Malaysia, with a specific focus on Iban pop songs. The views were gathered from various forms of discourse related to the subject matter, including written texts, conversations, research interviews, audio-visual materials, and interactive writing spaces (e.g., blogs, forums, social network sites). These views were analyzed using a qualitative analytical method that was primarily informed and guided by discourse analysis, and fortified by popular music and social reality theories. Discourse analysis in its broadest sense is "the study of social life, understood through the analysis of language in its

widest sense (including face-to-face talk, non-verbal interaction, images, symbols, and documents)" (Shaw and Bailey, 2009: 413). It offers ways of examining meanings through various theories and approaches that can describe and explain the language in use (e.g., verbal and non-verbal aspects of communication) and how language is used to construct meanings in social contexts (Shaw and Bailey, 2009).

This approach has resonance within the study as it explored the views of present-day Malaysians that were expressed in various forms of discourse, with particular attention to their understanding and knowledge of 'unity' and 'belonging' and how these were conceived through the language they used to describe their engagements with the Iban pop song in a specific social context. Discourse analysis, however, is not solely confined to explaining, for instance, the words, phrases, or sentences that people use to create meanings. Instead, it is concerned with language use beyond the boundaries of a sentence or an utterance. "Discourse analysts," as Gill (2000: 177) contends, "do not regard texts as vehicles to find out about some reality assumed to lie beyond or behind the language. Instead, they are interested in the text in its own right, and therefore ask different questions". For instance, in analyzing conversations among vegetarians, discourse analysts do not merely investigate why these individuals forsake eating meat but are interested in finding out how they justify their decisions to become vegetarian or how they positively identify themselves as a vegetarian (Gill, 2000). The same can be said of the questions asked in the study: why did the audience describe their sense of unity and belonging in such a way as a result of their engagements with the song, *Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis*? How did they justify their feelings of solidarity and cohesion, which may not coalesce with the 'grand' or 'official' narratives that framed and shaped those feelings amongst many Malaysians?

The analysis of the above-mentioned views was also guided by the theories of popular music and social reality. One of the underlying theories of popular music is that popular music audiences construct their understanding and knowledge of the world through various musical engagements, which Christopher Small describes as 'musicking': an act of taking "part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composition), or by dancing" (cited in Helfter and Ilari, 2015: 139). In other words, music is a form of action with the meanings related to musicking unveil themselves in terms of the interactions that occur in its course (Helfter and Ilari 2015). This view finds manifestation in the current study that analyzed how ordinary Malaysians developed their understanding and knowledge of unity and belonging through musicking, particularly their various engagements with the Iban pop song such as listening, singing, dancing, performing, and recalling their individual experiences

with it. Of particular focus would be how visions of oneness and connectedness were co-created in and through the dynamic relationship between the Iban pop song and its audience (i.e., ordinary Malaysians). Here lies another popular music theory -popular music reception- that guided the present study.

Following Tia Denora, Cavicchi (2002) posits that the reception of popular music (or any music genre for that matter) should not be understood entirely in terms of what a pop song means, but what it does in its dynamic relationship with the audience. He argues that popular music heightens the audience's awareness of what goes on in the general circumstances of their lives, which are framed and shaped by their engagements with this musical genre. The audience not only listens to and makes sense of popular music (e.g., sonically, lyrically, visually), but also connects their listening and interpretation of it to their ideologies and circumstances (Cavicchi, 2002). What is more is that popular music, as Siciliano (2013: 306) argues in his review of Denora's work, "provides raw cultural material used by individuals to exercise agentive control over mood, convey meaning, experience "virtual" possibilities, and articulate identity." This view has particular relevance in the study for examining how visions of unity and belonging were co-created in and through a dynamic interaction between Iban pop song and present-day Malaysians: the former evoked the feelings of inclusion and togetherness, and the latter conceived their understandings of these feelings and fostered them through the various ways they engaged with the song in their daily lives. Given the agentive control over meaning-making that popular music affords its audiences, some of the above-mentioned conceptions of unity and belonging may not be readily or easily aligned with the 'grand' or 'official' narratives of solidarity and cohesion in multicultural Malaysia.

This shows the applicability of Shamsul Amri Baharuddin's (1996a) social reality theory developed to understand the complex processes of identity formation and cultural experiences among people in Malaysia. Such process, as Shamsul A. B. (1996a: 477) contends, takes places within what he describes as "a "two social reality" context": first, the "authority-defined" social reality, one which is authoritatively defined by people who are part of the dominant power structure; and, second, the "everyday-defined" social reality, one which is experienced by the people in the course of their everyday life." Put within the context of the study, this social reality theory was used to analyze visions of unity and belonging that were engendered by people's personal experiences of engaging with the Iban pop song. These visions may, on the one hand, exemplify the 'grand' or 'official' narratives of unification and inclusion as espoused and promulgated by the government of the day via various policies, while on the other hand, may resist or redefine these authoritatively defined narratives precisely through the everyday-defined visions of togetherness and belongingness



that ordinary Malaysians create via their engagements with the Iban pop song, and the agentive control over meaning-making that the song affords.

To illustrate this further, the article presents and discusses the findings of the study in the following order: (1) a brief overview of the song, *Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis*, and its music video; (2) the audience's responses to the song, and (3) the audience's visions of unity and belonging that the song helped create.

## **BIAR BEKIKIS BULU BETIS - AN OVERVIEW**

The song *Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis* was a huge hit in the Sarawak local music scene, particularly in the first decades of the 2000s. It continues to be shared and enjoyed by listeners both locally and abroad, thanks to its familiar *mejeng* beat that is characteristic of the "freeform communal dance usually seen on dancefloors in Sarawak" (Langet, 2019). *Mejeng* has been popularized by many local musicians, artists, and entertainers since the 1980s. In a blog post titled, "Kepupusan Hari Gawai?" (The Extinction of Gawai), published in the Projek Dialog blog on June 12, 2014, Calvin Ohsey explained that a *mejeng* number typically contains various musical styles such as rock and roll, blues, *dangdut*, and *joget*. Band musicians, for example, would play *mejeng* numbers at *keramaian* (social gatherings and festivities) mainly because such numbers enliven the festive mood among guests. It is not uncommon to see guests of all ages break into dancing and singing whenever the *mejeng* numbers are performed by these musicians. The song, *Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis*, is a rock-and-roll genre, infused with the *mejeng* beat. It is sung by the famous Iban singer, Andrewson Ngalai, with much emotional conviction and earnestness. The lyrics were written by Andrewson himself, with the music composed by Ricky Jay (see Figure 1). The sounds are pervaded by the common rock-and-roll guitar chord progression (A-D-E-A), accompanied by electric organ and drumming that contribute to the song's catchy, toe-tapping *mejeng* tune.

*[Intro Lead]*

A  
**[1]** Bukit Sematan, Pulau Sumatra  
E  
Gunung selindung di Kota Jawa  
D A  
Dia alai aku bulih ngasu penemu  
E A  
Belajar puchau lelengau seribu guna

A  
**[2]** Aku enda peduli, aku enda ngira rugi  
E  
Seagi aku enda puas ati  
D A  
Biar aku ambis bekikis bulu betis  
E A  
Enti nuan bedau nyadi ke bini

*[Lead Gitar]*

**CHORUS:**  
D A  
Ila nuan dara, baru nuan nemu aku  
E A  
Duduk meugau-ugau di mua pintu  
D A  
Ila nuan dara, baru nuan nemu diri  
E A  
Nurun tangga belakang enda mai gari

**Ulang [2]**

*[Lead Gitar]*

**Ulang CHORUS**

**Ulang [2]**

The lyrics tell a man's determination to do whatever it takes to get the woman he loves. In the first verse, the man is seen going to Bukit Sematan at the far west tip of Sarawak, and Gunung Selindung in West Kalimantan, to learn love spells (*blajar pucau lelangau seribu guna*) that he can use to charm his lady love. The second verse reinforces his adamant determination to accomplish this difficult and dangerous feat: he does not care about the consequences of the love spells because he has nothing to lose (*Aku enda peduli, aku enda ngira rugi*). He will do anything, even having his hair leg fully shaved in making the woman his wife (*Biar aku ambis/Bekikis bulu betis/Enti nuan bedau nyadi ke bini*). Here lies the famous line of the song, *bekikis bulu betis*, and its significance in the Dayak culture: "For a man to have hairless legs means that he is willing to forgo his dignity, as hairy legs symbolize masculinity and manliness" (Langet, 2019). The man expresses the 'seriousness' of the matter in the chorus, in which he warns the lady that she will eventually know who he is, and what he is capable of. Once the love spell is cast on her, she will lose all her senses and surrender herself to him. Though the song has "a slightly dark undertone to its merry and easygoing beat, general consensus is that the song is meant as a light hearted joke, a possible jab at the foolishness of love and angst, as is quite common in Dayak mejeng music" (Langet, 2019).

The music video that accompanies the song reinforces further the song's message (see Figure 2). It opens with a black-and-white scene of a man (Andrewson Ngalai) walking through the forest, making his way to *Bukit Sematan* and *Gunung Selindung*. He is seen wearing a singlet, a pair of knee-length pants, and simple headgear. The scene then changes to the present moment where Andrewson is shown singing the lyrics (see Figure 3).



Figure 2: The opening scene of the music video. Source: buahemperingat (n.d.)



Figure 3: The scene showing Andrewson Ngalai in the music video. Source: buahemperingat (n.d.)

Here, the audience can see the singer's iconic fashion, including his signature black ray-ban sunglasses, black shirt, jeans, and shoe ensemble. The scene then changes to the black-and-white image of Andrewson walking through the forest, juxtaposed with more scenes of him singing the lyrics. The music video ends with the black-and-white image of Andrewson finally reaching his destination, followed by more images of him meeting and seeking knowledge of the love spell from a shaman. Despite the eeriness of the music video, many have expressed that the song's catchy tune draws them into physical activities such as singing and dancing, and how these activities create feelings of unity, togetherness, and camaraderie between them.

### **BIAR BEKIKIS BULU BETIS - AN AUDIENCE'S RESPONSE**

Since its release, the song, *Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis*, has garnered a great deal of attention from music lovers, critics, musicians, composers, academics, and politicians alike. This is evidenced by their particular views of the song as seen in the interactive writing spaces such as blogs, online forums, and social network sites.

In a blog post titled, "Bekikis Bulu Betis: The Other Sarawak Anthem", Rick Langet (2019) pointed out that the song is very familiar and a commonly used musical piece at nearly every public event imaginable. It has since become a 'go-to song' for many, especially those living in Sarawak "whenever (they) need to lose themselves or get the party started," thanks to its catchy, foot-tapping melody (Langet, 2019). As mentioned earlier, despite the song's "slightly dark undertone," the audience or listeners do not take this seriously and would rather immerse themselves in the *mejeng* music. What matters most, as Langet (2019) maintains, "is that many have considered it our pop culture anthem. The moment the beat starts, heads will turn, and bodies will be swaying to the beat".

Langet's views of the song found resonance among different individuals in other interactive writing spaces. In an online forum titled, '*Berkikis Bulu Betis' rai sambutan ulang tahun Yang Dipertua Negeri* (Berkikis Bulu Betis celebrates the birthday of His Excellency The Governor of Sarawak), forum members espoused to the news article, particularly the use of the song at the above-mentioned event. The article states that the then Sarawak Minister of Tourism, Datuk Amar Tun Johari Tun Openg, believed the song symbolized the spirit of unity ("melambangkan semangat perpaduan") among Malaysians. While some forum members questioned the relevance of using the song at the event, others commented that it was a valid choice as it heightened people's sense of unity (see Table 1). One forum member, Muntz, commented on 6 September 2012 that other local popular songs by Sarawak indigenous communities could also be used to achieve the same goal or purpose. These songs include *Kerimpak Kaca Lauya*

and *Semina Duduk Berimbai* (Iban), *Kampung Love* (Bidayuh), *Ika Nai Aku Ngiem* and *Telang Usan* (Kayan), *Ros Kalas* and *Mi Kolok Sigek* (Sarawak Malay).

Table 1: Audience Responses to the Song on the Online Forum

Visitor's Name	Comment and Date Uploaded
Dzurfikha Bolhassan	This is song really2 make all people dance when heard this. . . kmk org melayu sarawak pn minat lagu iban sbb ny rancak yha mlh best n rnduk ati (2 years ago) Reply: evanation (1 year ago) Kita besaudara. . .urg sarawak
Pablo Piscasso	Legend song . all sarawakian know this song.(6 months ago)
Elsy Cassidy	Sarawak's National Anthem (2 months ago)
Cobain Oslen	lagu kebangsaan sarawak tok. . haha. . lagu wajib mejeng. (10 months ago)
Miss Panda	"If u really sarawakian then u should know how to poco ii with berkikis bulu betis (2 months ago)
Hellosshi	Are you even a sarawakian if you dont know this song?!(3 days ago)
Bigbang Runningman	Miak sarawak tak kira bangsa semua pandai lagu twok. . .termasuk org semannanjung dia pandai jg (15 hours ago)
PUBG army	Lagu ikon sarawak tok.. mun g semenanjung menu lgu tok asak ati (8 months ago)

*Note:* \*The language used in the comments is Sarawak Malay which is spoken by the Sarawak Malay community.

In the comment section of a YouTube channel that features the song's music video, almost all visitors to this channel expressed a positive view about it. Many of them concurred that the song was much loved and well-liked by those living in Sarawak and beyond, including people from Sabah, *Semnanjung* (i.e., West Malaysia), Brunei, Kalimantan, and Sumatra. Worthy of mention are the expressions these visitors used in describing the feelings of unity, togetherness, and camaraderie between them, as well as their sense of belonging to a particular ethnic community or a particular place that the song evoked within them (see Table 2):

Table 2: Audience Responses to the Song on the YouTube Channel

Visitor Name	Comments and Date Uploaded
Seam	Kami Orang Iban Just Nak Cakap Ribuan Terima Kasih Buat Orang Semanjung & Sabah Kerana Meyokong Industri Muzik Kami #TimeCorona #PKP3 #StayAtHome (1 month ago)
Angel Fedrek	This song is the reason why sabahan love sarawakian (3 weeks ago)
Masro184 Michael	sabah sarawak adik beradik. .best x bosan dengar lagu kita. . peneman jiwa perantau (2 years ago)
Erriend James	Salam 1Borneo, saya dari Sabah minat lagu Sarawakian (9 months ago)
weekly well	sabahan, sarawakian the bestt (3 months ago)
ekyyee taxi	Salam dari budayuh Kalimantan barat. . . Salam damai slalu sodara di Sarawak malaysia (1 year ago)
Awan Jingga	Saya dari sumatra Indonesia, tapi saya suka lagu ini. Salam serumpun. . (11 months ago)
panter aja	Kalimantan like Salam dayak kanayat`n Salam satu darah dayak (7 months ago)
chanel Abal Abal Abcd	memang best ni lagu salam perdamaian dari melayu sambas (2 months ago)

These feelings were not unfounded, can be seen in the views of several Sarawakians whom we interviewed for the study. In her comments on the views expressed by the YouTube channel visitors, Atikah (pseudonym), a Malay female entrepreneur from Kuching, agreed that the song was capable of evoking such visions of unification and inclusion: ". . .ada bena dipadah sidak tuk. Kamek tawuk dan minat lagu tuk. Bila dengar di radio, selalu akan terfikir orang berkumpul di keramaian dan bersama sik kira bangsa. Tuk lah yang unikny dengan kita orang Sarawak yang sekian lamak idup bersama" (trans: there is truth in what these people say. I know and love this song. Whenever I hear it on the radio, I always think about people gathering at public evens and be together regardless of their races. This is the uniqueness of our people from Sarawak who have lived together for so long).

This was affirmed by Julia (pseudonym), a Bidayuh female civil officer from Kuching, who believed that the song was capable of uniting people by drawing them into activities that allowed them to foster a sense of closeness: ". . . memang lagu ni lagu yang boleh menyatukan semua orang, tak kisah dari Sarawak, Sabah atau Semanjung. Lagu ni memang selalu diguna oleh jabatan saya untuk majlis

rasmi atau acara sosial seperti senamrobik. Musik nya cukup membuat semua melakukan aktiviti bersama-sama. Sampai ada yang berlagu dan bertandak." (trans: this song can really make people come together, no matter they are from Sarawak, Sabah or Semanjung. This song is often used by my department for formal or social events such as aerobics. The music is enough to make people carry out activities together. To the extent that some break into singing and dancing).

Another participant, Razif (pseudonym), a Kelantanese who had lived and raised his family in Sarawak, held the same views but from a slightly different perspective. He believed that the song did more than just uniting the people, as it also helped him to rethink the way he understood what unity and belonging 'really' meant: ". . . dah lama dok Sarawak ni, masih heran macam mana pelbagai kaum boleh hidup dengan harmoni. Lagu ni memang boleh satu padukan mereka, dan boleh juga buat kita sedar yang perpaduan ni sebenarnya perkara yang mudah. Perlu tolak ansur dan percaya sesama kita." (trans: I have been here for quite some time, and I wonder how people of different races can live harmoniously. This song can unite these people, and can also make us be aware that unity is actually a simple thing. It needs tolerance and trust among us).

Also worthy of mention is the view of the individuals from the local music entertainment scene. Ethan (pseudonym), a Chinese male performer from Kota Samarahan. Although the song was highly requested by his audience, he felt that the music itself drew people together because of its familiarity that cuts across their differences: "When I do corporate function, a lot people request this song. They like it so much. No matter you Chinese, Malay, Iban who attend, everyone know it and enjoy themselves. But when I bring other songs in other language, some not familiar with it."

This was endorsed by James (pseudonym), a local music enthusiast from Sibul. He acknowledged the familiarity of the song's sonic quality, but this familiarity revealed more insights into the song's diverse audience: "No doubt the song's catchy tune is familiar. But that is because *mejeng* is not just a part of the Iban community, but also our lives in Sarawak. *Mejeng* is our local culture. *Mejeng* unites us, makes us forget about our hardship, makes us feel happy although for a brief moment. . . typically our way of life, the Sarawakian way. This is what I think is missing in the lives of our countrymen that explains why we struggle to be united in our own country."



## **BIAR BEKIKIS BULU BETIS - VISIONS OF UNITY AND BELONGING**

Several points can be gleaned from the views expressed by ordinary Malaysians about Iban pop songs and their relation to their visions of unity and belonging. First, the song's ability to heighten the feelings of solidarity and cohesion. These feelings, as discussed earlier, were engendered by the audience's personal experiences with the song in different ways and different settings at different times. Such experiences were recalled with a sense of excitement and enthusiasm as the audience articulated their views about the song concerning their sense of being and belonging together: the song either conjured up images of togetherness in the audience's minds whilst watching the music video or evoked their memories of singing and dancing together to the song when it was played or performed at public events that they had attended. This reinforces the fact that popular music can bring people together in various ways through their engagements with it that can have a direct impact on the neuro-chemicals in their brains, which are potent in bringing about social closeness and connection (Suttie 2016).

Second, the song's ability to create particular visions of unity and belonging. We can see this in the feelings of oneness and connectedness that the song effectuated, and how these feelings afforded the audience an agentive power or control over their visions of unity and belonging. This reminds us of Denora's contention that popular music "provides raw cultural material used by individuals to exercise agentive control over mood, convey meaning, experience "virtual" possibilities, and articulate identity (Siciliano, 2013: 306). Those who shared their views about the song on the YouTube channel, for example, framed their understanding and knowledge of unity and belonging in terms of a particular ethnic community within a specific natal or spatial location (e.g., *saya orang Iban/ I'm Iban; Aku iban brunei/I'm Brunei Iban; Aku dayak kalimantan barat/I'm West Kalimantan Dayak*). While this is not unexpected, given that people tend to identify themselves more in terms of their ethnic or natal communities whenever they interact in groups settings (in this case, the YouTube channel)(Farhaan Wali, 2016), there is something else about the audience's views that has an even stronger hold: visions of togetherness and inclusion were conceived through the audience's *sense of shared citizenship cum identity based on place*. These were revealed through the very language that the audience used in their responses to the song, where they identified themselves more closely with (1) their state of origin *rather than* their country (in this case, the state of Sarawak), and (2) their sense of belonging and membership to that state rather than to the nation (hence the terms, *Miak Sarawak* and Sarawakian).

This brings us to the third point: the song's ability to create visions of unity and belonging that may not be readily or easily aligned with the 'grand' or 'official'

narratives of *perpaduan* and *kekitaan* among people in multicultural Malaysia. Such narratives can be traced as far back as Mahathir Mohamad's Vision 2020 that was "much more ambitious than the older aims of the 1970 Articles of Faith of the State (*Rukunegara*), which declared it was dedicated to "achieving a greater unity of all [Malaysia's] peoples" (Hooker, 2004: 161), and the more recent 1Malaysia concept by Najib Tun Razak, deemed as "a national formula to foster the coming into being of a Malaysian race, thus uniting Malaysians of various races and religions" (Najib Razak et al., 2010: 77). Numerous studies, however, have shown that there exist competing meanings of unity, belonging, and identity among Malaysia's peoples: from the 'authority-defined' meanings that are delineated along with official definitions of national unity, belonging, and identity, as well as in terms of religious, ethnic and political lines (Holst, 2012; Verma 2019), to the 'everyday-defined' meanings that are constructed based on people's lived experiences and material conditions, which are shaped by their social-economic statuses, gender, media consumption and so on (Postill, 2006; Joseph, 2014). This reminds us of Shamsul A. B.'s (1996a) two social reality contexts in which the processes of identity formation in Malaysia take place. The two social reality contexts can be used to understand why some audience members identified themselves more closely with their state of origin and their sense of belonging and membership to the state. Rather than accusing these individuals or groups of people of being 'un-Malaysian' because of their strong sense of *semangat kenegerian* (state-based nationalism), it will be more useful to discuss why they decide to identify themselves as Sarawakian, and how they justify their decisions to do so.

The 2018 ISEAS Borneo Survey, among others, is a useful point of reference. The survey revealed that a majority (65%) of respondents identified themselves as *Sarawakian first*, with a minority (25%) identifying themselves as *Malaysian first* (Lee, 2018). The survey also revealed the respondents' enthusiasm over the Sarawak government initiative to reinstate English as the official state language and to open up more English medium schools in the state (Lee, 2018). Such findings call into question the authority-defined notions of national identity and unity constructed over the years through the Malay language following the Federal Constitution and promoted via national policies on language, education, and culture (Gill, 2014). This is not surprising because many people in Sarawak construct their sense of identity, unity, and belonging based on their everyday lived experiences and practices: from the languages that they use in daily conversations (e.g., many can speak Sarawak Malay, and even Iban and Bidayuh, *in addition* to Malay and English) to their sense of spatial attachment (e.g., *orang Kuching*/ the people of Kuching).

Based on our conversations with local informants and interview participants throughout the study, the people of Sarawak would normally include in their

daily conversations questions such as *Kitak orang nei?* or *Ari ni penatai nuan?* (where are you from/where do you come from?), and describe themselves by revealing their natal, spatial origin, as in *kamek orang Miri* (I'm the people of Sibul) or *Aku ari Sibul* (I'm from Sibul). It is also not unusual for the people of Sarawak to distinguish themselves from others by saying, *kamek orang Sarawak* (people of Sarawak) and *nuan orang Melaya* (you are the people of Malaya/West Malaysia). This, in our opinion, may help us understand why the audience responded to the Iban pop song in a particular way, namely, the Sarawakian way. It is possible to say that the song, *Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis*, while it is described as an 'anthem' of unity amongst Sarawakians, serves as a fodder for its audience to

(1) demonstrate their resistance or distinction against the authority-defined hegemony of West Malaysia (hence the *kamek orang Sarawak* vs *kitak orang Melaya*).

(2) remind their fellow Sarawakians and others of their struggle for equity and equality in their state (as can be seen in the Sarawak for Sarawakians civil movement, and the feelings of marginalization and disenfranchisement among many Sarawakians given the lack of development in the state).

(3) exemplify their 'connection' between their own 'people', and their 'disconnection' from the larger context of the Malaysian nation-state as a result of their struggle for equity and equality, and their feelings of marginalization and disenfranchisement.

Furthermore, our conversations with local informants and interview participants also revealed that many Sarawakians do not often regard or even view themselves as Bumi or non-Bumi unless they are placed in situations that require them to identify as one (e.g., filling out official government forms or census survey). Thus, we believe that the song, *Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis*, while evoking affections in its audience or listeners, can be viewed as a form of affective resistance to the top-down, officially-defined Malaysian national identity. For example, Sarawakian's views of Bumi and non-Bumi review how we understand what Bumiputera means. On the one hand, the authoritatively-defined Bumiputera identity can be traced as far back as the affirmative action policies, notably the New Economic policy (NEP; 1971-1990), which specifically aimed at assisting Bumiputera individuals (e.g., Malay and the indigenous people of Sabah and Sarawak) in trade and commerce. The term has since become an important marker of Malaysia's national identity, as Shamsul A. B. (1996b: 323) rightfully argues: "It is a *Bumiputera*-defined identity that has privileged many aspects of *Bumiputera* culture as the 'core' of the Malaysian national identity while recognizing if peripherally, the cultural symbols of other ethnic groups." The everyday-defined Bumiputera identity, on the other hand, is configured through

people's everyday practices and their various markers of self-identification, as evidenced among the different types of Bumiputeras: the non-Muslim (e.g., Christian and native religions) Bumiputera group, the radical Islamic Bumiputera group, the city-based, English-speaking, and middle-class Bumiputera group, and so on (Shamsul A. B., 1996b: 324 & 333). The audience who responded to the song, *Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis*, and the views expressed by our interview participants and informants, challenge the above-mentioned Bumiputera-defined national identity in all its configurations: they are (first and foremost) Sarawakians regardless of their differences.

While it is important to note that notions of identity, unity, and belonging in Sarawak are far more complex than we may think, at first sight, this article brings home the fact that commercially produced popular songs, most of which are written and sung in the official national language and carry a patriotic message or theme, are not the only ones that function as a vector or a catalyst for heightening feelings of togetherness and belonging among people in Malaysia. Popular music genres of or by the country's indigenous ethnic communities serve the same function, despite the visions of solidarity and attachment they engendered that may not be readily or easily aligned with the 'grand' or 'official' narratives that have long framed and shaped those visions in the people's minds.

Although people, especially those who were involved in the study, identified themselves more in terms of their ethnicity rather than their nationality and concerning their membership to the state rather than to the country as can be seen in or through their engagements with the Iban pop song, the article makes a case for the need to reconsider what *perpaduan* and *kekitaan* 'really' mean in present-day Malaysia. One way of doing this is by thinking about these concepts from the two social reality context, and how the two social realities may not coalesce with each other, and what this says about resistance, distinction, and disconnection that ordinary Malaysians experience daily as a result of their struggle for equity and equality in a country they call home. Shamsul A. B. (2014: 35) is right about the importance of understanding *perpaduan* and *kekitaan* by considering "the angle of the person of authority and the angle of the ordinary person." But yet we argue that there are (and have been) times when the angle of the ordinary person is obscured or blinded by the angle of the person of authority through the maneuverings of vested individuals or groups for their causes and interests. This speaks volumes about the long, expansive, and frustrating process of creating and achieving a national sense of identity, unity, and belonging in the country.

## CONCLUSION

This article discusses findings of a larger ongoing study that examines visions of unity and belonging among ordinary Malaysians 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 presented in this article analyzed the visions of unity and belonging that they conceived through various engagements with the song. The findings revealed that the visions were co-created in and through a dynamic interaction between the song and the audience: the former evoked the feelings of togetherness and inclusion, and the latter conceived their visions of unity and belonging based on those feelings. However, the findings further revealed that these visions did not coalesce with the 'grand' or 'official' narratives of unity and belonging in multicultural Malaysia. This is because these visions revealed the audience's shared sense of solidarity and connection to a state rather than to the country as what we have been led to believe through years of governmental initiatives in creating a national sense of unity and belonging. Nevertheless, these visions enable us to rethink how we have come to understand those 'grand' or 'official' narratives by considering people's everyday experiences and struggles in defining who they are and whether they belong to a country they call home. The article acknowledges that the results are not representative of Malaysians' views about popular music genres of other indigenous ethnic communities in Sarawak and even those in Sabah that may also have the potential to accomplish the same goal. At most, the results provide a basis for further studies on Malaysia's indigenous popular music in terms of their roles in and contributions to the long and never-ending process of unity, belonging, and identity formation in Malaysia.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work was supported by Yayasan Dayak Chair (Grant No: F09/DRC/1976/2020) and Universiti Malaysia Sarawak. We thank the editors of *Kajian Malaysia: Journal of Malaysian Studies* for their support, and the two anonymous reviewers for their efforts and thoughtful comments towards improving the manuscript. We would also like to thank all the respondents who have assisted in our fieldwork. We have no conflict of interest to declare. All remaining errors are our own.

## NOTES

1. Calvin Ohsey's blog post on "Kepupusan Hari Gawai?," the Projek Dialog Blog, posted June 12, 2014, <https://projekdialog.com/malay/kepupusan-hari-gawai/> (accessed 1 June 2020).
2. Ricky Langet's blog post on "Bekikis Bulu Betis: The Other Sarawak Anthem," the Belian Post Blog, blog post published on 26, September, 2019, <http://www.belianpost.com/2019/09/26/bekikis-bulu-betis-the-other-Sarawak-anthem/>.
3. ABCD Muntz, comment on "Lagu 'Berkikis Bulu Betis' rai sambutan ulang tahun Yang Dipertua Negeri!" , mforum.cari.com.my, comment posted on 6, September, 2012, [https://mforum.cari.com.my/forum.php?mod=view\\_thread&tid=673883&extra=&ordertype=1&page=2](https://mforum.cari.com.my/forum.php?mod=view_thread&tid=673883&extra=&ordertype=1&page=2) (accessed 1 June 2020).
4. Based on the researchers' view of the channel (performed on June 4, 2020), the music video was uploaded on February 21, 2007, and received 5 million views with 765 comments thus far. The channel itself has garnered over 13 thousand subscribers. More information about the video can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rHpKTxxFEsc>
5. Semi-structured interviews were used to elicit the views from several purposively selected participants concerning their knowledge, consumption, attitude, and experience with Iban pop songs. Some of the questions include, 'What do you think of the views expressed by the YouTube channel viewers?', 'Do you think the song, *Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis* can create people's sense or idea of unity in Malaysia/Sarawak?', 'Why do you say so?'
6. Welyne Jeffrey Jehom (1999) argues that authority-defined identity (i.e., ethnic identity) imposed by those in authority (such as through population census) upon members of ethnic groups or communities in Sarawak may not necessarily correspond with or to their everyday-defined identity.

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