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Identity Manipulation and Improvisatory Singing in Central Borneo

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Ethnic Categories and Identification

Most of the indigenous peoples in Borneo have been collectively referred to as “Dayak” by the Indonesian government, which perpetuates the Dutch colonial custom of naming specific ethnic groups as Dayak, such as Ngadju (Ngaju) Dayak, Selako Dayak, and Ma’anyan Dayak. Although originally an exonym that did not designate any single ethnic group, the term Dayak has had such a long history that the people themselves came to use it and it became a means to nurture inter-ethnic identity.¹

In Sarawak, officials of the white Rajah Brooke, following the usage established by earlier English explorers, used the term exclusively to refer to the Iban (sea Dayak) and the Bidayuh (land Dayak), but nowadays it means all of the indigenous peoples there. It may even be extended to include rather recent immigrants like the Chinese, as evidenced by the fact that one of the leading members of the Sarawak Dayak Party (Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak, or PBDS) is an ethnic Chinese. The Malay expression *orang ulu* (literally meaning “upriver people”) has also been used by the minorities themselves in Sarawak for at least 40 years.²

After Sarawakians chose to join Malaysia in 1963, they had to cope with Malays whose domination became stronger during the course of the ensuing 40 years. By using the term Dayak and/or *orang ulu*, Bornean minorities (or at least their leaders in Sarawak who had higher education) intended to ally and identify themselves with specific labels in order to enhance their political influence. This in turn led to exaggerating their cultural similarities and ignoring their differences.

Identity and Traditional Performing Arts in General

The Orang Ulu National Association (OUNA) was organized in Sarawak primarily to request official recognition and protection of their (customary) rights from the government. They define *orang ulu* as all of the indigenous people in Sarawak except the Iban and Melanau, who live in lowland and/or coastal areas (though in fact these two groups are major components of the Dayak, and the Melanau emigrated from the upper Rajang (Balui) River basin and still show linguistic and cultural similarities to the Kajang group).



Figure 1 Map of Borneo (Kalimantan).

OUNA later expanded its functions to include enhancing cultural unity. For example, in 1991 it began to offer a *sape* (traditional string instrument) class in Kuching. Although it is true that *sape* music is widespread and many tunes are common among the Kayan, Kenyah, and Kajang groups, they did not emphasize the differences found among themselves, nor among the Lun Bawang, Kelabit, and smaller groups: in fact, many subgroups are included under the labels “Kenyah” and “Kajang.”

The association of the *sape* with *orang ulu* as a whole dates back much further, as indicated by the following explanation displayed in the famous Sarawak Museum. This explanation was presumably written in the mid-1970s or earlier by a government ethnologist affiliated with the museum.

Sape. One of the most popular traditional musical instruments found in Borneo is the *sape*, a lute-type four-stringed instrument. This instrument is indigenous to and commonly played by the Orang Ulu group. The instrument provides music for dancing, for entertainment, and for the “witch-doctor” in healing ceremonies. The *sape* produces very sensitive and delicate tones. During dances, one musician plays the melody while another plays the rhythm. This is sufficient for the dancers, the only other sound being made by the dancers themselves either by stamping their feet or clapping their hands.

The Sarawak Cultural Village (SCV) on the outskirts of Kuching offers another example of the tendency toward belittling diversities among the minorities and creating Sarawakian culture. Noted as a tourist spot, this “living museum” shows, as its brochure says, “the state’s rich cultural diversity in one single place.” There are “7 authentic ethnic houses” of the Bidayuh, Iban, Penan, *orang ulu*, Melanau, Malay, and Chinese. Here, Bidayuh and Penan are not included among the *orang ulu*, though the brochure defines the term *orang ulu* as inclusive of the Penan: “a useful if vague term to describe the Central Borneo people living is [sic] Sarawak. Accounting for 5.5% of the total population, the Orang Ulu comprise the Penan, the Kayan, and the Kenyah, living in the middle and upper reaches of Sarawak’s longest rivers, as well as the Kelabit and Lun Bawang groups in the highlands proper.”

In fact, the Penan should be labeled *orang ulu* because of their habitat. However, because their ordinary house plan is not a longhouse but a small hut, and also because the Penan became a well-known “thorn in the side” of the government due to Western journalism focusing on environmental action against “rampant” logging in Sarawak, SCV constructed their hut separately from the *orang ulu* longhouse. Smaller ethnic groups are gathered into the *orang ulu* category, but not the internationally famous Penan nor the rather populous Bidayuh which itself comprises at least four subgroups classified according to their dialects.

A cultural show is held twice a day at the theater near the SCV entrance gate. It is performed by “young and exuberant [sic] Village artistes” who provide “magnificent multi-cultural dance performances.” The multi-cultural show is performed by a single troupe of dancers and musicians drawn from various ethnic groups, under the guidance of Malay and Chinese staff. Gerald (Geraldine) Law, a famous composer of Chinese descent in Sarawak, provides many of the tunes. Although some *orang ulu* people complain that not all of the performers and staff are *orang ulu* (or even Dayak), most regard such performances as a kind of modern creation that shows new possibilities for their traditional performing arts. Traditional dances and instrumental music are utilized as the basis for creating these new *orang ulu*, Dayak, or even Sarawakian performing arts.

The same tendency can also be found in East Kalimantan (Propinsi Kalimantan Timur), Indonesia. There are annual performing arts festivals at the provincial and district levels, where dancers and musicians gather on a village basis and perform their characteristic “local” performing arts. Because most of the contemporary villages in East Kalimantan, even in the interior area, are composed of at least two ethnic groups, performances by “village” troupes are necessarily the result of amalgamation and assimilation as are some of the ethnic groups themselves.³ Spurred by the inclusive label Dayak, dances and music of the *suku bangsa Dayak* are well on the way toward homogenization.

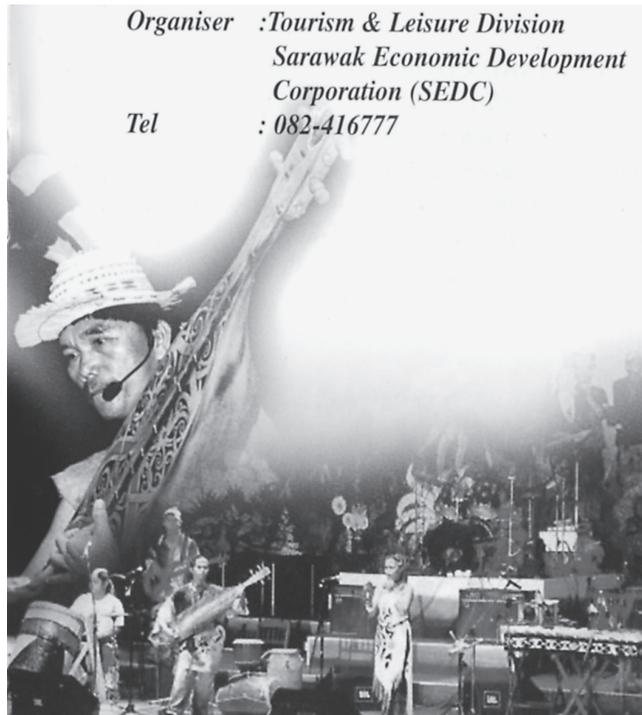


Figure 2 Sape player's images in Sarawak calendar of events 2003 (Ministry of Tourism Sarawak)

Identity and Oral Tradition

Concerning oral literature including songs and chants, differences are emphasized more than similarities due to the diverse languages used. Many scholars and researchers including the Dayak themselves have attempted to record, transcribe, and translate core stories of their oral literature for particular groups.

In Sarawak, the Iban began their own research earlier than did other minorities. Following important and historic works on his own Iban oral literature by Benedict Sandin, James Masing published his work based on his doctoral thesis on the Baleh River (his homeland) in 1997.

Pioneering work for other Sarawak groups has been done by Father A. D. Galvin on the Baram Kenyah oral tradition, followed in 1973 by the Australian Carol Rubenstein's huge amount of recordings from the Iban, Bidayuh, Melanau, Kelabit, Kayan, Kenyah, and Penan. More recently, Jayl Langub (or, more precisely, Jayl son of Langub) published a book in corporation with the Penan in 2001, a magnificent and painstaking work by an *orang ulu*. Though sporadic and scattered in diverse journals, government reports, and other publications, we can also find some Indonesian translations of the Dayak oral literature.

As seen typically in Jayl's book titled *Suket: Penan Folk Stories*, there is a tendency to emphasize differences among linguistic groups. Based on the classification of the Penan by British anthropologist Rodney Needham, Jayl transcribed and translated into English nine stories from the Western Penan and one from the Eastern Penan. The single story from the Eastern Penan, titled *Kangkaput* (a kind of bird), is juxtaposed with a story bearing the same title from the Western Penan for the purpose of comparison. The East and West classification should be understood as a highly specialized academic distinction because most of the Penan themselves and the adjacent *orang ulu* were unaware of this difference in detail until recently. Although we can distinguish substantial linguistic and cultural differences between these two subgroups, most Sarawakians, from government officials to rural *orang ulu*, consider these two Penan groups as one, with only a small dialectal difference.

The improvisatory singing tradition among the *orang ulu* is, in a sense, at the core of their oral literature, and it can be a firm basis for dividing them into sub-subgroups. *Sinuy* (Penan) and *ketenak* (Kenyah Lepo' Time, or Timai), two such genres that I heard (and performed to some extent), lend themselves to such division. Because performing them is like talking spontaneously rather than narrating fixed stories, their performers and audience are virtually confined to each linguistic subgroup. In some cases, even among the Kenyah Lepo' Time, a *ketenak* by Uma Kelap in Sarawak cannot be understood by Uma Pawa', nor even by the same Uma Kelap in Kalimantan Timur, both being subgroups of Lepo' Time, which is in turn a subgroup of the Kenyah. *Sinuy* is performed and appreciated only by the (Western) Penan themselves with very few exceptions (namely, this Japanese researcher), but when the Penan on the other river system heard a playback of my sound recordings, they found some phrases were entirely unknown to them, because of the local usage of special words in poetry.

Although they are conscious of such differences, *orang ulu* leaders do not find it politically or economically advantageous to emphasize cultural differences between them. They choose to neglect dialectal differences as much as possible, because they believe that identifying with a bigger ethnic group will bring better results for all subgroups and individuals.

Such an operational or manipulative attitude toward ethnic identity is actually rather traditional for the *orang ulu*. As I mentioned already, the Aoheng in Kalimantan Timur now is an amalgamation of the Aoheng (itself the amalgamation of several smaller groups such as the Acue, Halunge, Amue, and Auva), Seputan, and Bukat. Also, the Kajang in Sarawak is an ethnic category devised by small groups (Kejaman, La'anan, Sekapan, Punan Bah, and others) when faced with the Kayan invasion of their homeland, the Balui/Rajang area.

As Rousseau rightly noted, “linguistic similarities are not necessarily a sign of common origin but may be the result of assimilation and amalgamation” (Rousseau 1990: 20). In like fashion, linguistic differences do not always mean different origins in central Borneo. In fact, many minorities there have a long history of disguising, pretending, or appropriating their ethnic identity with substantial changes in their cultural features including performing arts and language. This means that they have decided to transform, or even to abandon, parts of their tradition. Thus, it seems true that “it is no use crying over lost tradition,” especially when the tears are shed by outsiders.

Improvisatory Singing Traditions (Living and/or Dead)

Traditionally, intermarriage between different linguistic groups has not been uncommon among the various peoples in central Borneo, which is one of the major reasons for their use of the generic term *orang ulu*. This, of course, is also promoted by accelerating urbanization. The basis for distinct improvisatory genres is therefore on the point of disappearing. Recognizing this situation, some of the Kenyah Lepo’ Time people who migrated to urban areas in Sarawak have been considering the possibility of a reunion across the international border with their remote relatives in Kalimantan Timur, focusing the gathering’s activities on the improvisatory singing session.

This goal is practically a fantasy, or a projection that only exists in contemporary discourse among minorities who believe that their “rich cultural heritage” should be preserved, maintained, and developed. Such discourse contradicts the strategy I mentioned before, namely the expansion/amalgamation identity strategy to identify with a bigger group, though the discourse does conform to the recent cultural policy instituted by the federal government of Malaysia.⁴ Senior members of OUNA, for example, are therefore reluctant to reply when asked about the feasibility of the reunion project, because many of them are officials of the Sarawak state government.

The reunion’s proponents know that I sometimes visit the upper Kayan/Bahau/Mentarang area in Kalimantan Timur, and they never fail to ask me to convey their plan to the Kenyah Lepo’ Time living there. This is one small act I can and do perform on behalf of their sincere attempt to maintain and develop their *ketenak* singing practice. Unfortunately, if the majority of their people (including those who are government officials) are not eager to support the reunion project, their options for international contact are quite limited, and so they see this Japanese researcher as a potential messenger who might open up a way to make their plan come true. However, as far as I can determine, their plan is not supported by the majority of the *orang ulu* nor the majority of the Kenyah. If they do realize their plan, it could

undermine the *orang ulu* and Sarawakian “ethnic” or “Malaysian” identity by shifting the focus to trans-border tribal identity, which may have political repercussions.

In the early 1990s, the so-called Bruno Manser case aroused a tidal wave of indignation in Europe and North America against logging in Sarawak. The state government has been since then very suspicious and uncooperative toward NGO activities that respond to minority voices among the minorities themselves.⁵ Once again, NGOs, domestic, overseas or a combination of both, are considered detrimental to the Malaysian state and its policies. The discussion and action on the part of some Kenyah people to develop and recreate their *ketenak* tradition therefore faces major hurdles in Sarawak, though people there are now much richer than before and therefore in a better position to accomplish their goal by themselves.

Apparently, most of the Kenyah Lepo’ Time in Indonesia have shown little interest in the proposal from Sarawak, supposedly because they have to be Indonesian rather than Kenyah under the national identity scheme devised by the central government. Some of them, however, told me that ideally they should have such a reunion to enhance their traditional improvisatory singing (*ketenak*) skills because members of the younger generation are going to lose their linguistic competence for quick repartee in conversation and songs like *ketenak*: a substantial portion of young people there, especially in the urban areas, are now more fluent in Bahasa Indonesia than in Kenyah.

I continue to interact with persons involved in this plan, not to preserve their tradition but to look for possibilities to develop a new tradition, although that idea is rather controversial among the Kenyah or *orang ulu* themselves, let alone the government. My personal justification is that some Kenyah, but admittedly not many, asked me to do so. I hope I will not become another Bruno Manser.

The Drinking Feast: A New Strategy for Improvisatory Singing

Another test case that I have been involved in is to make improvisatory singing genres de-localized or language-free. The Dayak peoples are well-known for their enjoyment of alcohol in Muslim-dominated nations, and their traditional home brew has been replaced by commercial beer and whiskey as they have become more urbanized. Traditional religious festive occasions have been replaced by the “drinking feast” held at one house or another of the Dayak in town nearly on a daily basis, but it is rather hard to get alcoholic beverages in Kalimantan now.

At some feasts I attended, participants were eager to try to recite their own oral literature not in its original language but in Indonesian (or Malay), Iban, or Kayan, depending on the language repertoire of those who were present. Upon my request, some of them tried to perform improvisatory songs from their own tradition in one

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Photo 1 Singing session by Kenyah and Penan people (2003)

of these lingua franca but managed to do so only with much difficulty, though most of them can speak and recite in these languages. These experiences made me encourage them further to try such songs.

Beginning in 2001, a group consisting of active singers from the Penan and Kenyah in Sarawak and Kalimantan Timur, started a project to devise improvisatory singing techniques in Iban or Malay with my assistance. When two Bidayuh members joined in 2002 (one of them is in fact the wife of a Kenyah member and another is her relative from Indonesia), we also bridged the border between Sarawak and Kalimantan Barat.⁶

Although they tend to drink too much at these feasts to think systematically about singing techniques, there is some possibility of developing a new singing style in their respective national languages. Many minor differences are found among their singing traditions, but they did agree that repetition of a line of text and consistent rhyme should be kept, and that a three or four tone scale is enough for effective song construction.

The project is quite personal with spontaneous membership. In this sense, it is not connected with the existence of a particular ethnic group nor its cultural survival in the way that the Kenyah Lepo' Time case that I described is. On the other hand, its purpose is not just to construct a bigger cultural unit or "extended" ethnic group.

They intend to acquire a new form or style of linguistic expression for the *orang ulu* or Dayak. Even if the intention itself involves some aspects of cultural (and even political) integration among several ethnic groups that would transcend the international border and thus might be seen as confrontational by each national government, its starting point is an affirmation of the use of Malay or Indonesian as a national language. We do not need to adhere to the all-too-common framework



Photo 2 Singing session by Kenyah Uma Pawa' people (2001)

that defines such a cultural activity simply as the focus of strained relations between the majority (national identity and government) and the minority, nor should we confirm and thereby affirm the existing sociocultural situation.

Language has been thought to be the primary nonnegotiable core element that can identify ethnic groups. Accordingly, oral literature (including songs) has been treated as one of the most important markers of ethnic identity. But the *orang ulu* show that ethnic identity is operational and selective, and the group's separation from outsiders (not only from Sarawakians or Borneans but also from the majority of the populace in the respective nations) is not strictly fixed, at least in theory. If we admit this, then we can take a flexible position about this minority's activities, or at least not ignore their diverse wishes. In practice, the *orang ulu* consider that language is also selective, and use it as a tool for manipulating their ethnic identity. If some minority groups within the *orang ulu* want to manipulate their improvisatory songs, we can help and encourage them to do so even if such action may lead to considerable changes in their singing tradition.

Coda

Who has the right to change the improvisatory singing tradition of the *orang ulu*? Is it copyrighted or owned solely by this group? Now I would like to say "no" to the second question. Of course, copyright does not belong to anyone else, official organizations included. The *orang ulu* themselves, as well as everyone else concerned, myself included, cannot help but appreciate, sing, modify, and change their songs.

To understand the situation, I would like to suggest the usefulness of appropriating the concept of “copyleft” from the realm of open source software, advocated by the GNU (“GNU is Not Unix”) project. As they declare at their website, “copyleft is a general method for making a program free software and requiring all modified and extended versions of the program to be free software as well. [...] In the GNU project, our aim is to give all users the freedom to redistribute and change GNU software. If middlemen could strip off the freedom, we might have many users, but those users would not have freedom. So instead of putting GNU software in the public domain, we ‘copyleft’ it. Copyleft says that anyone who redistributes the software, with or without changes, must pass along the freedom to further copy and change it.”

Though it is beyond the scope of this paper to deal with the problems concerning copyright (legal and moral issues) and ethnomusicology, the concept of copyleft seems to be appropriate to most traditional cultures because the features of each culture have not been copyrighted by (or assigned to) any individual or group. Nor are they copyrightable, because they are transmitted from generation to generation through time and move from one place to another in space, evolving continually. Viewed in terms of copyleft, the *orang ulu*’s improvisatory singing tradition and the activities surrounding it can be much better understood. It is not just in the “public domain” or “non-copyright-free.” It can be archived in basically non-proprietary museums, but it cannot be owned or otherwise controlled exclusively by anyone. Although it is invaluable to document and preserve traditional music in archives and museums, these places cannot contain “living” traditions because the life of the music is outside such facilities, among the people. In this sense, their tradition is, and should be, copyleft for further use, modification or appropriation.

Notes

- 1 It is said that the word was originally borrowed from some central Borneo languages, for example, *daye* (Kenyah) and *dayah* (Penan), meaning “upriver” or “inland”.
- 2 Of course, there are many exceptions such as the Penan on the upper Belaga River with whom I have worked: some of the younger people asked me repeatedly what a Dayak was and who *orang ulu* were in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Although they had heard these words previously, they did not know exactly what their meaning included.
- 3 For example, the Aoheng consists of Aoheng proper (also known by the exonym, Penihing), plus the former nomadic Seputan and Bukat.
- 4 As Tang Sooi Beng mentioned elsewhere in this volume, the federal government reoriented their cultural policy from setting up “Malaysian” (“national”) culture to respecting each ethnic group’s own tradition during the past decade or so.
- 5 One of the latest examples is an article in *The Borneo Post* on August 16, 2003 titled “Masing tells Bakun families to move out: Construction work on RM9 billion project to

begin soon.” The Iban anthropologist James Masing, who is Social Development and Urbanisation Minister of Sarawak state, referring to the resettlement of *orang ulu* precipitated by a hydro-electric dam project in the upper Rajang area, reportedly said that he “believed their refusal to move out could partly be due to the sentimental attachment they had to the area and partly because of negative influence from irresponsible non-governmental organisations (NGOs).”

- 6 Traditionally, intermarriage between different linguistic groups (in most cases geographically adjacent groups) made both husband and wife bilingual if the marriage continued long. In most cases nowadays, however, such couples use Malay or Indonesian as a lingua franca between them and with their children, especially in urban areas.

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