

WHY THE ANCIENT MUSICAL ESSENCE IS STILL RETAINED IN DUSUN TINDAL'S INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC WITHIN ITS MODERN COMMUNITY?

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Dusun Tindal's instrumental music practice within the context of modernity of the society in Tenghilan, a town that is located on northwest Sabah. The study looks into the deriving modish musical styles and forms in the root of the ancient traditions especially in the aspects of musical natures, music compositions, musical functions and philosophies. Dusun Tindal belongs to the largest ethnic group of Kadazandusun in Sabah and is widely exposed to rapid technological modernization and subsequent interactions within a multi-cultural society and new contexts of performance in the cosmopolitan cities.

Since 1990s, the Dusun Tindals in Tenghilan have begun to lose most of their old musical culture. Contemporary musical groups are developed such as the *Bamboo Orchestra*, which becomes trendy and popular among their youngsters. The contemporary musical ensemble is a newly developed tradition combining a mixture of traditional and western musical instruments and styles. Due to the new mind-sets and tastes of their young people, as well as to open up opportunities to venture into the exotic blooms of globalized musical festivals and tourism, their music is manifold and endeavouring in captive of the hearts of the global audience.

However, the people still keep hold of some of their old traditions realizing the integral role they play in their life and society. The people are also aware of the power of these primeval cultural constituents that have attracted a colossal number of audiences and guaranteed the consumable sales of their performance tickets and CDs. This study attempts to disclose the grounds and rationales behind the persistence of the Dusun Tindals in upholding their ancient musical essence until today.

Type of Paper: Conceptual / Empirical

Keywords: Bamboo Orchestra; Dusun Tindal Contemporary Music; Dusun Tindal Music

1. Introduction

Since 1990s, the Dusun Tindals, a sub-ethnic to a larger Kadazandusun ethnic cluster in Sabah, have begun to lose most of their old musical culture from their past. The interview reports from the field research conducted in Kampung Tinuhan, Tenghilan, Sabah indicate a major sign of downtrend in the practices of their traditional music among the younger generations. Many young Dusun Tindals have lost interests to learn their old musical instruments such as the *turiding* or *bungkau*, *tongkibong* and *tongkungon*. Due to the new mind-sets and tastes of their younger generation, as well as to seek for better opportunities in life, the young people prefer to venture into the exotic blooms of globalized musical trends and tourism. Their ethnic's modern music is manifold and endeavouring in captive of the hearts of the global audience.

Today, Dusun Tindal instrumental music is absorbed into subsequent interactions within a multi-cultural society and new contexts of performance in their cosmopolitan capital city, Kota Kinabalu. A mixture of western and their own traditional musical instruments express their enthusiastic drives to keep their own identity alive and at the same time, to weld into the vivacious pool of global popular challenges and excitements. Although emerging as minority in the world, the people are capable of seeing the integral role the traditional musical essence play in current popular music trends as the primeval power to attract a colossal number of audiences to guarantee the consumable sales of the musical performance tickets and CDs, as well as to make a meaningful contribution to the humanity.

This paper examines the Dusun Tindal instrumental music practice within the context of modernity of the society in Kampung Tinuhan, Tenghilan that is situated on northwest Sabah. The study looks into the deriving modish musical styles and forms in root of the ancient traditions especially in the aspects of the musical natures, music compositions, musical functions and philosophies. This study attempts to disclose the grounds and rationales behind the persistence of the Dusun Tindals in upholding their ancient musical essence until today.

2. The Locality

The Dusun Tindals first came to Kampung Tinuhan - a village lying close to the town of Tenghilan - in the 1880s, before the arrival of the British Chartered Company. Kampung Tinuhan is a rather small village, moving towards rapid modernization as the villagers start abandoning their traditional way of life. It is a village with a distance approximately 10 minutes' drive away from the town of Tenghilan. Kampung Tinuhan is about 25 square kilometres in size with an estimated population of 350, located in Tenghilan (a small town of around 400 hectares) within the district of Tuaran on the west coast of Sabah, Malaysia. It is situated between the Sabah capital city of Kota Kinabalu and the city of Kota Belud. The distance from Tenghilan to Kota Kinabalu is approximately 38 kilometres (about 45 minutes' drive). Kampung Tinuhan was built by the indigenous people from the northern side of Sabah such as Bundu Tuhan, Ranau and Pinasang, Kota Belud. Almost 94% of the villagers are Dusun Tindal, which belongs to the ethnic cluster of Kadazandusun in Sabah due to the sharing of closely related traditions and languages. The languages of Dusunic people from all places in Sabah are nearly 90% the same (Pugh, 2004). The remaining 6% of the population in the village consists of Iban, Bidayuh, Sino-Dusun and Malay (who migrated to the village through marriages) (Lombuti S., 2009-15).



Figure 1. Map of Tenghilan Town

The research had been conducted by working closely with Sentri Lombuti (village head of Kampung Tinuhan), Moffen Gondoloi (head of *Bamboo Orchestra*), K. Albert (traditional music teacher of Tenghilan High School), Giansing Lakansa (main music instrument maker in Tenghilan), Sarabun Malas (former village head of Kampung Tinuhan), and Louzim Pantai (chairman of Committee of Welfare & Development in Kampung Tinuhan from 1985-1989) and among other reliable Dusun Tindal villagers, especially the elder ones who are above forty five years old. Several field trips were conducted by our research team under full assistance and guidance of the Dusun Tindal villagers.

Observations were done not only as an outsider but also as an insider through learning the music and performing together with the musicians. Moreover, considerable time period had been spent in the village to obtain direct experiences and knowledge about the culture, life philosophies and daily activities of the villagers. The traditional instrumental music that was performed in the daily life and festive occasions were recorded in the forms of audio and visual materials.

3. Bamboo Orchestra

The villagers still practice the traditional instrumental ensemble known as *mengagong* or *mangagong*, which means “beating the gong”. *Mengagong* or *mangagong* is usually cultivated among the older generations, and performed in their traditional festivals and celebrations such as the Harvest Festival or *Pesta Keamatan*, held annually in May 30-31. The *mengagong* gong ensemble uses traditional percussive musical instruments - *gong lapos-lapos*, *gong mongoluton*, *gong songkoluon*, *gong dindihon*, *gong ponohuri*, *kulingtangan*, *gandang* (Gondoloi, 2009-15). Today, not many Dusun Tindal youngsters appreciate and keen to learn the considered old-fashioned music. Instead, *Bamboo Orchestra*, a semi-modernized musical group that combines traditional bamboo musical instruments - *suling* (horizontal flute), *sompoton* (mouth organ), bamboo *kulintangan* (marimba-like instrument), *tungkawir* (idiophone), with an adaption of western musical instruments – drum, electric guitars, maracas (shaker), *rak* (idiophone), and xylophones that are made from bamboo, was

developed by the older generations in the 20th century to attract the young generations to learn their traditional musical instruments (Thing, 2009-12).

The ensemble combined both the old and young generations of the village. The *bamboo orchestra* from Kampung Tinuhan is currently the member of Society of Bamboo Orchestra, “Ombak”, in Sabah. The ensemble has taken the essential role to provide musical entertainment in most of the wedding ceremonies, social occasions, official functions, *Pesta Kaamatan* (harvest festivals) and tourist shows around the nearby villages, towns and Kota Kinabalu. The orchestra is increasingly getting popular and demanded in the Dusun Tindal communities in Sabah or among the tourist destinations and hotels in Sabah (Chin, 2009).



Figure 2. The Musical Instruments in Dusun Tindal *Bamboo Orchestra*
Photo: courtesy of Moffen Gondoloi.

Bamboo orchestra has become trendy and popular among Dusun Tindal youngsters and local Sabahan music industries. The contemporary musical ensemble is a newly developed tradition combining a mixture of traditional and western musical instruments and styles. All the musical instruments are made of bamboo. The arrangement of the music compositions is modernized and apt to imitate the simple popular musical styles by adding in the traditional musical melodies and playing techniques (Chong, 2010). It is an effort to renovate and revive Dusun Tindal traditional musical instruments and ensembles. It is considered quite successful in attracting and promoting Dusun Tindal musical culture among the young generations, as well as opening up a new door for their music to reach the outside world (Lombuti A., 2009-2015).

In the *bamboo orchestra*, *suling* plays the main melodies and the *sompoton* provides the harmonies. Bamboo *rak*, *tungkawir* and bamboo maracas provide simple percussive rhythms, while bamboo *kulintangan* accompanies the ensemble with improvised melodies and rhythms. All the musical instruments in the orchestra are tuned according to the Western diatonic tuning system with a tuner or keyboard. Traditionally, the musical instruments were tuned in pentatonic scales, and not confined to any particular keys or to the western musical twelve tones system (Gondoloi, 2009-15). The ensemble performs both the traditional and western repertoires of modern songs and music. The compositions are prominently adopting popular musical structures, as well as western musical scales and notations.

“Ombak” *Bamboo Orchestra* from Persatuan Ombak (Bamboo Orchestra Society) Sabah is one of the biggest *bamboo orchestra* groups in Sabah, consisting of members and musicians from several villages around Tenghilan especially Kampung Tinuhan, with the village head, Sentri Lombuti, as the leading *sompoton* player and his brother, Albert Lombuti, as the leading flute player. “Ombak” *Bamboo Orchestra* have performed in many occasions such as Concert ISCEP at The Kadazandusun Cultural Association in 2008 (with students from South Korea), Pesta 1 Malaysia at Tuaran in 2009, Harvest Festival Celebration at City Mall, Kota Kinabalu in 2010, Craft Promotion Malaysia at Lintasan Deasoka, Kota Kinabalu in 2010, and *Kaamatan* Festival at The Kadazandusun Cultural Association, Penampang in 2011. On the other hand, the student group of *bamboo orchestra* from Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Tenghilan (National High School of Tenghilan) has outstandingly performed together with students from Elementary High School Yilan, Taiwan, with the original song of Tamparuli Bridge (Jambatan Tamparuli) in Taiwan in 2013. The high school orchestra group has also participated in World Cup Portugal Dance and Music Festival in 2014. The video clips of these mentioned performances can be obtained on “youtube” online.

A Dusun Tindal musician, K. Albert Lombuti, in Kampung Tinuhan has served as the music advisor of the *bamboo orchestra* in Tenghilan High School. The group has recorded their music in a small modern music studio, TJC Talent Studio, in Kampung Melinsau nearby Kampung Tinuhan and commercialized their CD music in the local music market (Lombuti A., 2009-15).



Gambarajah diatas menunjukkan jalan masuk ke rumah informan iaitu encik K. Albert



Figure 3. TJC Talent Music Recording Studio in Kampung Melinsau nearby Kampung Tinuhan. Photo: author.

4. Ancient Musical Essence

Today, most of the villagers, similar to other ethnic groups in Sabah, have acculturated themselves with modern cultures. The lives of their younger generations are changing gradually into new forms and patterns, while the wise ones from the older generations are striving to preserve their traditional culture and tradition. Although their music culture has speedily been modernized, the old ones hope that the good elements from their old wisdom would not be defunct but continue to serve for the good of their people and the bad influences from the outside world would not destroy their future generations.

Along with the continuous changes and modernizations of Dusun Tindal traditional music, it is foreseen that Dusun Tindal people will set the western or modern popular music

as their model for their future forms and styles of music. Slowly, the traditional musical forms, styles and philosophies are predicted to vanish as the modern musical concepts and musical instruments are increasingly substituting and absorbing into the old musical frames. Today, Dusun Tindal *bamboo orchestras* follow the footsteps of the world popular musical trends with the aims of achieving higher names and better monetary returns in Malaysian and global music industries. Eventually, it is possible that the current Dusun Tindal unique and distinctive traditional musical identity will be replaced by or merged into the widely popularized modern music. However, with the persistent efforts from the older generations, certain ancient musical elements are still retained in their modern music and compromisingly accepted by the young musicians.

The ancient musical elements that are still preserved in the modern music of *bamboo orchestra* are the unique musical playing techniques, aesthetical tastes, and functional philosophies.

All the traditional musical instruments in the ensemble combine both the westernized and traditional playing techniques that the young musicians learn from their old musicians music classes in schools and private western music lessons. The traditional playing techniques embrace free, spontaneous and natural performing styles. Improvisation is the main feature causing the performances to be different from one to another even though there is a notated music to be followed. The ensemble is led by the old musicians who are the teachers and mentors to the young ones and who know only the traditional playing skills. Consequently, the musical skills transmitted to the young musicians are traditional in nature as they learn mostly through observation and memory. Besides few formal western music classes in schools, both the old and young musicians do not have much opportunity to acquire good formal musical training like those in the big cities or the west (Lakansa 2010-2015). In addition, the old musicians realize that ancient playing styles are the important spicy ingredients of a performance that make the music sounds more alive, astounding and exotic to many of the audience around the world. These ethnic people observe different fusion of music in the world, such as in the Rainforest Festival in Sarawak, and are determined that ancient musical playing styles usually catches the hearts and attentions, and glorify the stage. Somehow, people no matter from anywhere around the world are awed and enlightened by the old music close to nature or from the remote places far from the cosmopolitan cities. As the old Dusun Tindal people explain, the phenomenon is a result from the psychological needs and reactions of the people in the modern hectic and stressful life (Karau, 2009-12).

The music of the *bamboo orchestra* emanates aesthetical aura and charm from those being alive in the past. Different aesthetical musical sounds and expressions are taught to the young musicians through forms of oral transmission (music scores function only to record their music most of the time), where the children learn the music very naturally in their daily life with the vast nature and their people being around. The young musicians actually like the nature of their learning environment compared to the formal rigid classrooms in the schools. Their interest and energy can be incessantly prolonged and strengthened with the traditional settings of learning environs. Their musical ideas can only spring and increase in that particular conducive learning conditions in which it is capable to contribute toward the flourish of appreciative and enchanting aesthetical beauty in the music performances. These are the reasons traditional musical aesthetics and learning forms remain until today in the ensemble (Malas, 2009-2012).

In old days, the Dusun Tindal nurtured unique musical concepts such as freedom, warmth, harmony, altruism, and unity in their musical practices. Today, *bamboo orchestra* pertain to these philosophies as a meaningful constituent in their performances.

Traditionally, Dusun Tindal instrumental music was a functional tool that served their communities in the social and cultural aspects towards well development and prosperity of their people. Today, in the modern music of *bamboo orchestra*, the old musicians naturally bring along the ancient philosophies into the young musicians and their new forms of music,

in hope to perform music not only for self-interests but to bring meanings and benefits to their communities and all others.

Music and life were intimately connected in Dusun Tindal culture. Music is considered as part of their souls and something natural, at the same time sacred. In *bamboo orchestra* music, natural profound beauty is preserved. It is also an ancient knowledge of the Dusun Tindal that natural and soothing musical sound is a good musical therapy to help and make oneself happy, entertained and relaxed. Therefore, their modern music performances keep hold of serving their communities to bring happiness and relaxation. This may also help the modern societies to release from stress and life pressures. Music indirectly represents the soul of their people or reflects their identity that is directly connected to their ancestors way back thousands of years ago. Therefore, these people also hope that the new form of performance may function to give light and help to promote their identity in the wider platforms outside Sabah (Pantai, 2009-12).

In addition, ancient instrumental music was performed for the benefits of the entire village, not for personal benefits. The performers' mind-sets are conformed towards their entire communities and they do not long for own fame or popularity, but to cultivate mainly love, care and altruism for their people. Their old people believe this could ensure healthy growth of their society and young generations. It may also ensure good values such as humbleness, contentment, altruism and other virtuous qualities among their people (Chin, 2009). Therefore, the elder experienced musicians in the *bamboo orchestra* would strive to teach their young performers of the virtuous and altruistic thoughts and mentality to make their performances functionally meaningful to the audience.

5. Conclusions

Dusun Tindal, as a minority ethnic group in Sabah, has advanced in musical development to bring their people onto a new phase of challenge in music industries. Their determination and wit have driven them to create a new style of instrumental ensemble, *bamboo orchestra*, serving not only to local music markets but aiming for a bigger glamorous stage of globalized achievements.

Both western and traditional music instruments and systems are a well fusion in the contemporary ensemble. Global modern musical styles are the key compositional and performing structures and the music is recorded and performed on stage to sell their shows in tourist destinations and cultural institutions. Instead of transforming completely into a modern form of ensemble music, the old generations conserve the traditional elements of musical playing techniques, aesthetical tastes, and functional philosophies in the modern music shadowing and reflecting the nature, culture and life philosophy of their ancestors. This give the audience an opportunity to grasp a glimpse on the ancient musical glows of Dusun Tindal in their contemporary instrumental music developed within the modernized communities.

It is emphasized by the old Dusun Tindal musicians that their music is intended for cultivation of profound beauty and positive values that bring the people harmony, happiness and peace. With the protection of ancient musical essence within their modern music ensemble, the people make efforts to ensure the innate quality of their music capable of making good contributions to the communities besides aspiring for good returns in music business.

This is one of the strategies the Dusun Tindals see to be able to give light to their music in a long run among their future generations, to open up opportunities in generating income, and to maintain their cultural identity for their own survival. Lastly, as carved in their ancestral life monument, human life will become meaningless if there is no altruistic contributions in the cultural tradition to benefit their people and other communities.

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