

Strengthening Cultural Connectivity through Integrating Indigenous Knowledge Systems into Undergraduate Coursework: A Perspective from Sabah

Jacqueline Pugh-Kitingan, Universiti Malaysia Sabah

Introduction

This paper briefly discusses how traditional knowledge systems are integrated into some undergraduate coursework at Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS). This provides the opportunity towards strengthening cultural connectivity to indigenous communities among undergraduate students from diverse backgrounds. The challenges are examined and recommendations suggested.

Cultural connectivity is here defined as having access to or a connection with traditional cultures and their knowledge systems. This paper refers to the traditional cultures and indigenous knowledge systems of Sabah, the east Malaysian state of northern Borneo. The discussion here involves the indigenous communities of Sabah, providing both the source of traditional knowledge, i.e., the community elders and members vis-à-vis the keepers, and the target of traditional knowledge vis-à-vis Sabahan university students. The other target of the traditional knowledge is non-Sabahan students, i.e., students from other Malaysian communities and foreigners. Cultural connectivity is viewed as a positive and stabilising feature of societies undergoing change. As Appell (1986:33) said, "The essential feature of the capacity to deal with change is an appreciation of the past and where one has come from... people can deal with change when they know their past was a valuable experience in preparation for the future..." Integrating indigenous knowledge systems into undergraduate coursework is thus important not only for scholarship, but for the implementation of the Federal Government's policy of promoting equity in education and of developing Malaysia as a higher education hub in the region (Tham, 2011:5-9). Understanding and access to Malaysian traditional culture can be a foundation for developing a stable and educated nation in the 21st century.

This discussion is based specifically on experiences teaching the third year courses (subjects) *Borneo Ethnography* for thirteen years and *Ethnomusicology* for twelve years in the Anthropology-Sociology Programme (ANSOS) of the former School of Social Sciences. It also draws upon experiences teaching the second year course *Borneo Music Studies* and the third

year courses *Ethnomusicology I* and *Ethnomusicology II* since 2011 in the Music Programme (Music) of the former School of Arts. On 1 June 2014, these Schools were combined to form the UMS Faculty of Humanities, Arts and Heritage. Although the Schools no longer exist, the various Programmes continue under the Faculty. Students taking these ANSOS courses include those who are majoring in Anthropology and Sociology, as well as students from other Programmes. The Music course *Borneo Music Studies* is also offered as a separate course to third year students from the Visual Arts Programme.

The students for these courses come from diverse Malaysian cultural backgrounds. Sometimes, there are also a small number of foreign students. For example, in Semester 3 of the 2010/2011 session and Semester 1 of 2011/2012, classes for the courses *Ethnomusicology I* and *Ethnomusicology II* (each 36 students) included one student from China. In another example, classes for Visual Arts students taking the course *Borneo Music Studies* in Semester 1 of the 2012/2013 Session (64 students) included three students from China. An exchange student from Brunei took third year ANSOS courses, including *Borneo Ethnography* (66 students), in Semester 1 of 2011/2012 as accreditation for his degree at Universiti Brunei Darussalam.

Although the composition of classes varies from one semester to another, around half of the students taking ANSOS courses have come from various states in Peninsular Malaysia. The majority of this group have been Malays with one or two Indians and Chinese students in most cohorts and, in the 2008/2009 Session, classes included two Orang Asli students. The rest of these classes have been made up of students from the various Sabahan ethnic communities, as well as several Sarawakians. Classes have ranged in size over the years from 25 to 132 for *Borneo Ethnography*, and from 25 to 60 for *Ethnomusicology*. Students taking Music courses, on the other hand, have come mainly from the indigenous societies of Sabah. Class sizes for the Music courses have numbered from 36 to 64.

Malaysia has over one hundred major ethnic groups, including over fifty from Sabah, around forty from Sarawak, and nineteen Orang Asli groups, the

“Integration of traditional knowledge into courses for these students is achieved through fieldwork among indigenous communities, and visits to the Sabah Museum.”

Malays, Chinese, Indians, Peranakan and others from Peninsular Malaysia (Asmah, 2004; Boutin, 2004; Nicholas, 2006; Pugh-Kitingan & Hasan Mat Nor, 2007). Around thirty-three of Sabah’s ethnic groups are indigenous to the state, and mostly comprise speakers from the Dusunic, Murutic and Paitanic families of Austronesian languages. Austronesians from other language families found in regions outside of Sabah are also present including the Sama-Bajau peoples, the Iranun, Brunei-Kadayan, Lundayeh and others (King & King, 1984 [1997]). Many students are ignorant about this rich ethnic and cultural diversity. The challenge in these courses is to guide them into an experiential appreciation of Sabah’s cultures, while at the same time teaching them basic methodology in the disciplines of *Ethnography* and *Ethnomusicology*. Integration of traditional knowledge into courses for these students is achieved through fieldwork among indigenous communities and visits to the Sabah Museum.

Integrating Indigenous Knowledge through Fieldwork

Fieldwork is essential for the ethnomusicologist to establish cultural connectivity, regardless of whether the field is a remote indigenous society in a foreign country, an urban ethnic group, or the researcher’s own community. As noted fifty years ago by Nettl (1964:63-78), there are many kinds of ethnomusicological fieldwork ranging from general documentation of a community’s performance genres, to the musical biography of a single expert.

Hood’s (1960, 1971[1982]:230-231) concept of “bi-musicality” or the ability of a student from outside a culture to learn to perform, if possible, like a musician within the community (just as a linguist can be bilingual) developed from field research. As a research technique, this culturally connective approach enables the researcher to gain a greater understanding of a community’s music, its aesthetics and meanings as indigenous knowledge through learning from indigenous musicians.

Merriam’s (pers.comm. Merriam 1976; see also Merriam 1968) definition of Ethnomusicology as “the study of music in terms of the people and culture that produce it” also underscored the importance of cultural connectivity through fieldwork for the

impartation of traditional knowledge. Hence he felt that ethnosemantics, or the understanding of peoples’ conceptualisations about their music, is the ultimate goal of the ethnomusicologist.

Barz and Cooley (2008:3-4) also write:

“...‘fieldwork,’ a process that positions scholars as social actors within the very cultural phenomena they study. Ethnographic fieldwork requires meaningful face-to-face interactions with other individuals...by actively taking part in a society’s musical-cultural practices, the ethnomusicologist [has] the potential for uniquely and truly participatory participant observation.”

While this concerns serious ethnomusicological research, it can also apply to undergraduate students for whom the host village, where fieldwork takes place, becomes the classroom. Fieldwork for Ethnomusicology courses at UMS, utilising this “village as classroom” concept, has included one trip to the Gana Murut of Bingkor, Keningau, and many trips to the Rungus of Matunggong in northern Sabah and to the Kadazan Dusun of Tambunan in the central interior.

During the Bingkor trip, Anthropology students learned the declining musical sport *Mouliliun Tagunggak Gana* in which two teams of 108 players each run around and try to encircle one another while beating their *tagunggak* bamboo idiophones. The Gana Murut number around 2,000 people, with only 250 still speaking Gana. Overshadowed by the dominant neighbouring Kuijau Dusun and Keningau Murut, they have lost much of their culture due to acculturation and intermarriage. Today, *Mouliliun Tagunggak* is rarely performed (Pugh-Kitingan, 2013a).

Students had difficulty playing interlocking *tagunggak* patterns and lost during a match with Gana musicians. The trip, however, exposed them to music from another culture in its home village and provided them with an opportunity for field documentation of the *tagunggak* instruments and their performance techniques. For students from other parts of Malaysia, the field visit provided an exciting adventure into Sabah’s picturesque interior.

Field trips to the Rungus community of Matunggong, Kudat District have introduced students to living traditional music. The Rungus are a Dusunic group of around 70,000, most of whom are Christians who maintain their cultural traditions while adapting well to change in the 21st century.

The field trip encompasses a morning and an afternoon activity. Students spend the morning at Kampung Sumangkap, where villagers have developed a

contemporary gong-making industry using zinc sheeting. The zinc is measured, cut and beaten into shape using sledge hammers over truck wheel rims; the parts are welded, then spray painted to resemble original brass gongs. Traditionally, gongs were not made here, but were traded from the coastal Iranun, once renowned regionally for their brasswork (Pugh-Kitingan, 2010). Nowadays, a complete set of zinc Rungus gongs costs only a few hundred ringgit, whereas a single traditional large brass *tawag* gong could cost up to RM1,000.00. At Kampung Sumangkap, students are allowed to visit gong workshops owned by various families. They are encouraged to interview the men and women making the gongs, and to photograph the manufacturing process.

The afternoon is spent at Kampung Bavanggazo, in an authentic Rungus longhouse. This longhouse is used for the tourist Homestay Programme of Malaysia's Federal Government. In the longhouse public gallery, the students watch, photograph and record performances of the solo long-necked *sundatang* lute, *turali* noseflute, and *mongigol-sumundai* dancing and the *manaradan* ritual dance accompanied by the Rungus ongkob tuntungan gong ensemble of six hanging gongs, a lap gong and the single-headed *tontog* drum. They also observe women weaving and doing beadwork, and are free to photograph, ask questions, and look into some of the private family apartments in the longhouse.

This fieldwork has successfully introduced authentic Rungus culture to undergraduates from throughout Malaysia. The music and dancing was performed by indigenous experts in its authentic setting. For non-Rungus students, especially those from Peninsular Malaysia and foreign countries, this is a unique opportunity to actually sit in the public gallery of a genuine Rungus longhouse (which is structurally different from longhouses of other cultures) with Rungus people and observe the performance of traditional Rungus instrumental music and dance. This first-hand experience far surpasses sitting in a university classroom and listening to recorded music or watching films of Rungus performance. It has briefly brought these non-Rungus students right into the daily life of the Rungus and provided direct access to their intangible cultural heritage and traditional knowledge. Foreign students who know very little about Sabahan cultures have found this an enlightening educational experience. Students from other local backgrounds have noted similarities and differences between their own cultures and that of the Rungus. For Rungus students, it has reinforced the importance of their vibrant cultural heritage as worthy of serious research, thus strengthening their own cultural connectivity. (Plate 1).

The most successful fieldwork was carried out among the Kadazan Dusun of Kampung Tikolod, Tambunan



Plate 1 Students (right) documenting the performance of the Rungus *sundatang* at Kg. Bavanggazo

(Photograph: Jacqueline Pugh-Kitingan)

District. The students were not only exposed to indigenous music in its authentic setting, they were taught how to make and even play many of the traditional instruments. The Kadazan Dusun are Sabah's largest indigenous group and the largest ethnic group overall at around 25% of the state's traditional population. Kampung Tikolod in Tambunan is where the *sompoton* mouthorgan originated centuries ago (Pugh-Kitingan 2004:67, 2011). In the past most villagers played *sompoton*. Nowadays, only some old men and one younger man, Encik Juie Maikon (45 years), still perform. Older men no longer make the instrument because their eyes lack clarity to see to cut and tune the intricate vibrating reeds from *polod* palm skin that are inserted into each sounding bamboo pipe resonator. Apart from *sompoton*, other instruments found here include the *bungkau* (*polod* jew's harp), *tongkungon* (plucked idiochordal bamboo tube zither), *takobung* (struck idiochordal tube zither), *turali* (noseflute) and *suling* (mouthflute), as well as ensembles of bamboo *togunggak* idiophones and the traditional *songkogungan* ensemble of seven hanging gongs and a hand-held gong played together with a double-headed drum (Pugh-Kitingan, 2003; 2004:19-42, 67-149).

The students meet the musicians at the village Community Hall. Groups of around seven students are appointed to a musician. After being interviewed by the students regarding his or her musical biography and instrument, the musician takes the students to surrounding fields and bush to collect materials for constructing the particular instrument. The students are then shown how to make and play the instrument. Although many instruments are difficult to master and the students do not have the time to become truly "bi-musical" in Hood's terms, the process of active field interaction enables them to appreciate the wisdom of indigenous knowledge (Plate 2). They are often surprised to learn that instrumental construction is based on acoustical principles. Field trips to picturesque Kampung Tikolod have also enabled them to see life in a traditional Kadazan Dusun village.



Plate 2 Mr. Juie Maikon (second left, in check shirt) demonstrating sompoton construction for students in Kg. Tikolod, Tambunan
(Photograph: Jacqueline Pugh-Kitingan)

Establishing Cultural Connectivity through Fieldwork

These short trips have been eye-openers for many students, especially those from outside Sabah. “Village as classroom” experiences with indigenous experts as teachers in their home settings have, in Barz and Cooley’s words, positioned students as “actors within the very cultural phenomena that they study” through meaningful face-to-face encounters with indigenous people. Fieldtrips to Tikolod, especially, have enabled students to be truly participant observers. With each musician as “uncle” or “auntie” to his or her group, students have learned about the organology of traditional instruments, sourcing component materials from the environment for their manufacture, utilising traditional knowledge of construction, and performance techniques, as well as the life histories of indigenous musicians and history of the village. They have applied basic ethnomusicological field techniques and directly learned methods of eliciting in the field, interviewing informants, recording and filming musical performances, and collating meta data through positive interactions with their village teachers (Pugh-Kitingan 2013b).

Fieldtrips have also had positive impacts on host communities and this includes financial remuneration. The Tikolod musicians have pooled hall rental and informant’s fees to purchase a new *songkogungan* set for their Community Hall. Fieldwork has also revived interest in traditional music among younger villagers, with some joining the students in learning from the musicians. Nowadays, a few village youths assist the expert musicians in teaching some instruments to the students. During holidays or after school hours, the village primary school children also mingle with the UMS students to observe the manufacture and performance of their heritage instruments.

Integrating Indigenous Knowledge through Smart Partnerships with Sabah Museum

Sabah Museum, holder of Sabah’s heritage collections, is an important source of indigenous knowledge. Its main complex in Kota Kinabalu has extensive grounds that include the Heritage Village (*Kampung Warisan*), formerly called the “Traditional Houses Project.” This project, designed by Patricia Regis a former Sabah Museum Director, is an ongoing development showcasing unique architectural styles from throughout Sabah. Each house is constructed by village experts using authentic materials. Currently, there are twenty-eight houses in the project. During state festivals, people from the respective ethnic communities live in the houses while making their handicrafts under the “living museum” concept. Craftsmen also stay there when building or repairing houses.

The Heritage Village is utilised for teaching *Borneo Ethnography*. Groups of students are assigned different houses to document as objects of material culture from the respective communities. Accompanied by Museum guides, they have free entry to the Village. Visits last for half a day. Recently, the Museum launched the programmes “Living Heritage Village” and “Night Safari at the Sabah Museum”. Visitors pay to stay overnight in the houses and follow cultural knowledge treasure hunts throughout the grounds. Future UMS visits may utilise these programmes. Sabah Museum has successfully brought Sabah’s cultures from the rural areas to undergraduate students in the city (Plate 3).



Plate 3 Students interviewing Makiang men building the traditional Makiang House in Phase II of the Heritage Village, Sabah Museum
(Photograph: Jacqueline Pugh-Kitingan)

Challenges

Integrating indigenous knowledge into undergraduate coursework through these methods poses many constraints, including time, funding and transport limitations, and the demise of indigenous experts.

Time constraints limit fieldwork to less than a week including travel time. This is problematic during the standard thirteen week semester. The students have other courses to complete. UMS, like most Malaysian comprehensive universities (formerly called “teaching universities”) that focus on undergraduate courses in addition to research and postgraduate degrees, allows three years for Bachelor’s degrees with Honours whereas research universities, that focus on research and postgraduates in addition to undergraduate courses, usually have four years for Honours degrees as in overseas universities. UMS students feel pressured to complete large volumes of coursework with a thesis and/or practical exercise and compulsory co-curricular activities. There is insufficient time for fieldwork.

“Integrating indigenous knowledge into undergraduate coursework through these methods poses many constraints, including time, funding and transport limitations, and the demise of indigenous experts.”

Financial constraints and transport limitations affect undergraduate fieldwork. Funding for informants’ fees, students’ food and lodging must be allocated. Costs increase with longer fieldwork. Transporting large numbers of students requires suitable and safe bus transport. In addition, simultaneous fieldwork in different courses limits the availability of university buses, and the buses for city travel are unsuitable for long distance travel over mountainous terrain.

The most serious concern, however, is the demise of indigenous experts. If their knowledge is not passed on, it will die out. With education and employment elsewhere, many younger people are unfamiliar with their forebears’ deeper traditional knowledge. Concerted efforts are needed to document this for cultural continuity and knowledge.

Concluding Recommendations

To overcome the above challenges and concerns, the following are recommended. Firstly, longer fieldwork should be incorporated into undergraduate courses at Malaysian comprehensive universities like UMS. This will necessitate extending the current three year duration for Honours degrees to four years, so that students can stay longer in the field and benefit more from “village as classroom” experiences.

Secondly, with the suggested lengthening of the Honours degrees, specific funding must be allocated to support fieldwork with a large proportion of it for

the provision of adequate transport. Funds should be distributed according to the numbers of undergraduates enrolled in each session.

Thirdly, there should be greater utilisation of Sabah Museum and museums elsewhere as sources of traditional knowledge. Apart from its main Kota Kinabalu complex, Sabah Museum has several site museums focusing on aspects of local archaeological, historical and cultural heritage.

Finally and most importantly, there must be greater official recognition for the keepers of traditional knowledge, especially from Sabah and Sarawak where indigenous peoples collectively comprise the majority. This may be achieved through employing traditional experts as adjunct university staff. More importantly, however, the Federal Government could establish “Cultural Treasures” awards, like the Philippines “National Cultural Treasures” where traditional experts are remunerated for life with a proviso that they pass on their knowledge to younger generations (Pugh-Kitingan, 2004:82). At present there is funding available through the National Heritage Department for one-off payments to a few selected traditional experts. This programme is still developing and has yet to be adopted in Sabah. A similar scheme to the Philippines “National Cultural Treasures” awards in Sabah would ensure that cultural connectivity is strengthened between indigenous experts and future generations of Malaysians through continuous financial remuneration of the experts. These “Cultural Treasures” could then transmit their knowledge in village, museum and university settings, and this would create greater opportunities for the integration of indigenous knowledge systems into higher education in Sabah.

References

- Appell, George N. (1986). Social anthropological research among the Rungus Dusun. A talk for the Sabah society. *Sabah Society Journal*, 8(2):194-209.
- Asmah Haji Omar. (2004). Languages of Sarawak. In Professor Dato’ Dr. Amah Haji Omar (ed.) *The Encyclopedia of Malaysia, Volume 9: Languages and Literature*, pp. 30-31. Kuala Lumpur: Editions Didier Millet Sdn. Bhd.
- Barz, Gregory F. & Timothy J., Cooley. (2008). Casting shadows: Fieldwork is dead! Long live fieldwork! Introduction. In Gregory F. Barz & Timothy J. Cooley (eds.). *Shadows in the Field. New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology*. Second Edition, pp. 3-24. ew York: Oxford University Press.
- Boutin, Michael. (2004). Languages of Sabah. In Prof. Dato’ Dr. Amah Haji Omar (ed.) *The Encyclopedia of Malaysia, Volume 9: Languages and Literature*, pp. 38-39. Kuala Lumpur: Editions Didier Millet Sdn. Bhd.

- Hood, Mantle. (1960). The Challenge of "Bi-Musicality". *Ethnomusicology* 4(2):55-59.
- (1971). *The Ethnomusicologist*. Reprinted 1982. Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press.
- King, Julie K. & John Wayne King (eds.). (1984). *Languages of Sabah: A survey report*. Pacific Linguistics C-78. Reprinted 1997. Canberra: Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University.
- Merriam, Alan P. (1968). Ethnomusicology. In "Music." *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*. Encyclopedia.com. Retrieved on 10 June 2014 from <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G2-3045000843.html>.
- Nettl, Bruno. (1964). *Theory and Method in Ethnomusicology*. New York: The Free Press.
- Nicholas, Colin. (2006). The Orang Asli: Origins, identity and classification. In Prof. Dato' Dr. Hood Salleh (ed.). *The Encyclopedia of Malaysia, Volume 12: Peoples and Traditions*, pp. 20-21.
- Pugh-Kitingan, Jacqueline. (2003). *Alat-alat muzik dan muzik instrumental Kadazan Dusun Tambunan*. Kota Kinabalu: Pejabat Kebudayaan Dan Kesenian Negeri Sabah.
- (2004). *Selected papers on music in Sabah*. Kota Kinabalu: Kadazandusun Chair, Universiti Malaysia Sabah.
- (2010). From Brunei? Preliminary enquiries about Iranun gong-making and metalwork on the Tempasuk Plains of Sabah, Malaysia. In Loren Billings & Nelleke Goudswaarde (eds.), *Piakandatu ami Dr. Howard P. McKaughan*, pp. 225-229 (with photographs on CD). Manila: Linguistic Society of the Philippines and SIL Philippines.
- (2011). A Preliminary Comparison of the Kadazandusun *Sompoton* from Tambunan and the *Tangara Murut Kulundi* of Inarad, Upper Kinabatangan. *Gendang Alam*, 2:67-82.
- (2013a). Music, movement, sport and identity: The *Moliliun Tagunggak* of the Gana Murut of Sabah, Malaysia. In Mohd Anis Md Nor, Patricia Matusky, Tan Sooi Beng, Jacqueline Pugh-Kitingan, Felicidad Prudente & Hanafi Hussin (eds.), *(Re)Producing Southeast Asian Performing Arts & Southeast Asian bodies, Music, Dance and Other Movement Arts. Proceedings from the 2nd Symposium of the ICTM Study Group on Performing Arts of Southeast Asia*, pp. 162-168. Manila: Philippine Women's University.
- (2013b). Village as classroom: Teaching ethnomusicology at UMS. *3rd PACIA (3rd International Conference on Performing Arts as Creative Industries in Asia) Proceedings*. CD of papers. Kota Kinabalu: School of Arts, Universiti Malaysia Sabah.
- Pugh-Kitingan, Jacqueline & Hasan Mat Nor (2007). Cultural History and Ethnic Diversity of Malaysia. In Rosnah Ismail & Uichol Kim (compilers). *Malaysia and Islam in the Global Context: Psychological, Social and Cultural Perspectives*, pp. 17-66. Kota Kinabalu: Universiti Malaysia Sabah.
- Tham Siew Yean. (2011). Exploring Access and Equity in Malaysia's Private Higher Education. *ADB Working Paper Series*, No. 280. Tokyo: Asian Development Bank Institute. Retrieved on 11 June 2014 from <http://www.abdi.org/workingpaper2011/04/19/4513.access.equity.malaysia.higher.education/>