

## Iban Pop Song: Identity, Unity, and Belonging

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### ABSTRACT

Popular music has been known to convey a sense of togetherness and affiliation among diverse populations in multiethnic and multicultural nations. Malaysia is a unique case where local mainstream popular music has expressed a collective sense of unity and belonging among its multiethnic citizens and communities. Although numerous studies have examined this phenomenon, very little research has been conducted about the role of local indigenous popular music in communicating a sense of connectedness and inclusion among Malaysians from diverse backgrounds. The study presented in this paper set out to examine this by focusing on the role that Iban pop songs played for that reason. Through a public perception survey, the study gathered the views of 82 respondents from the Southern, Central and Northern regions of Sarawak on the famous Iban pop song, *Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis* by Andrewson Ngalai in terms of how it helped create ideas about unity and belonging among Sarawakians. The findings revealed that the participants asserted that *Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis* instils pride because it is synonymous with various occasions. The results also showed that the *Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis* song made the Sarawakian proud of their origin. The study has implications for future research as it highlights the necessity of acknowledging that the popular musical genre of the indigenous community can bring people together and feel closer to their home country.

**Contribution/Originality:** The study contributes to the existing literature that highlights the need to recognize and acknowledge the role that popular music of indigenous communities plays in bringing people with diverse background together and feel closer to their home country.

## 1. Introduction

Indigenous popular music refers to a popular musical genre that indigenous people worldwide produce. One famous example is Yothu Yindhi, the Australian musical group that brought its brand of aboriginal popular music to the mainstream music landscape in the early 1990s. Indigenous popular music has been the subject of scholarly research, mainly related to people's sense of identity, unity, and belonging. Some of these studies include Thai music and identity conducted by [Eamsa-Ard \(2006\)](#), identity and social cohesion in Mali by [Potter \(2019\)](#), and unity and identity among Malaysians by [Adil and Hamzah \(2019\)](#). However, a prominent gap can be seen between these studies. It is found that the previous studies mainly focus on the construction of national identity rather than focusing on unity or social cohesion. Next, some previous studies focus more on investigating the influencing factor: whether popular music is influenced by the identity of the native community or vice versa. Some previous studies focus mainly on the musical component in creating an indigenous community's identity. However, the previous studies of indigenous popular music and unity are primarily found in the non-Malaysian context. Previous Malaysian studies on indigenous popular music on unity focus on the cultural and emotional impact of popular music on audiences' sense of unity ([Adil & Hamzah, 2019](#)) and how the vision of unity is created through popular music ([Jerome et al., 2021](#)).

From all these gaps, there is still a lack of studies focusing on the role of Indigenous popular songs in identity construction and their connection to the diverse visions of unity in Malaysia. Therefore, to fill in the research gap, this paper investigates the role of music produced by Malaysia's indigenous minority community in constructing national identity and shaping visions of unity in Malaysia on various levels. The paper specifically seeks to investigate the role of the Iban pop song (*Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis* by Andrewson Ngalai) in constructing the Sarawak/kians vision of unity. This paper also analyzes the effects of Iban pop songs on the manifestations and implementations of this vision at both local and national levels through a quantitative method.

## 2. Literature Review

Popular music and its analyses demonstrate the role of music and its impact on consumers. The lyrical content of the song conveys a message to the audience. However, non-linguistic elements also may influence the consumers or the audiences. Various lexical aspects are observed across multiple musical discourses, which comprise lexemes from general to specialized words ([Aleshinskaya, 2013](#)).

The choice of music and stylistic style in modern indigenous musicians fill the gap between Australian nationality and indigenous Australia ([Guy, 2015](#)). The study claimed that indigenous music paves its way in allocating cross-cultural communication that removes the essentialization of myths among indigenous beings. The sound is familiarized among non-indigenous audiences, and it produces an interaction group socially and

morally. Its role as a ground for dialogues on nationalism and history is strengthened through the flexible transitions between indigenous and non-indigenous people, sounds, and concepts. Indigenous music is also perceived as an approachable and convincing tool to evoke public awareness of the modern indigenous struggles through power and representations (Jun Wu, 2014). The case study analyzed the lyrical content of Aboriginal rock groups that revealed the significance of their music in representing the Aboriginal identity and place whilst functioning as a base for indigenous and non-indigenous Australians in apprehending the straight contest and negotiation of socio-political relations. These studies have shown that music proves to be a medium for constructing identity and representation.

Music is attached to European identities' cultural, social, and political issues (Maglov, 2016). Maglov (2016) showed that the Eurovision Song Contest functions as a common ground in uniting diverse nations through various performances and musical genres. However, it is argued that music develops the identities rather than the identity that develops and influences music (Negus & Velazquez, 2002). The consumers attain their identity, history, and destiny through their experiences with music, besides bridging cultural identities and specific music genre practices to achieve self-knowledge. In this semiotic study of music, Salsa music is intangible from the representation of Latin identities. It embodies a typical Latin formula incorporating different regional influences where all Latinos engage in this song regardless of their country of origin (Kattari, 2009). Hence, the diverse pan- Latino audiences are united through the music as it fosters an understanding of their shared concerns and common heritage among the participants.

Morgan (2012) claimed that Tuaregs, Arabs, and Songhoi view Mali as a nation comprising all its diverse peoples. The observation is authenticated by arguing that the interdiction of music led to the breakdown of social relations due to the questions of identity raised during the crisis. Thus, music's ability to rebuild national cohesion has been damaged (Potter, 2019). The political groups in Mali utilized music as a crucial instrument to build narratives of the nation, where music is one of the ultimate mediums implemented to spread the new identity of nationalism (Potter, 2019). This qualitative research analyzed documentaries, short films, and interviews with musicians besides the lyrical content of songs. It clearly shows that musical constructions of identity have been a central means of building a national identity and propagating unity among the diverse communities of Mali. Musical performances facilitated national cohesion and fostered intercultural understanding by amplifying the country's musical richness, specifically through live musical performances. Hence, in Mali, music is one of the mechanisms for constructing identities in Mali. It promotes national unity and national cohesion because music is the common ground for intercultural dialogue besides propagating an influence in changing the behaviours towards ethnic groups of inter-communal tensions.

Lueders (2016) outlines the impact of Britpop's representation on British identity among British youths and their attitudes. The Britpop references on culture evoked a significant nostalgic sense and played its role in bridging the modern culture of youth with the older generations. This study has shown that music influences shaping the identity of the youths. However, this study is limited to observing youth's attitudes towards the Britpop. Focusing on the Thai people, Eamsa-Ard (2006) substantiated this notion through the implementation group interview and textual analysis, where music is discovered to play its role in developing the identity and ideology of the Thai people besides the processes of modernization through music. The popular music genres across the continent are inclusive of Thailand's *pleng lukgrung* (urban music), *pleng lukthung* (country music),

*pleng puea chiwit* (life song), and *pleng* string (young urban music). *Pleng lukgrung* and *pleng lukthung* promote the authority-defined Thai identity. *Pleng puea chiwit* proclaims a Thai identity that incarnates people's fundamental rights. At the same time, *pleng* string indicates a virtually modern, urban, and youth-oriented Thainess and can be noticed through the mix-up of Western and local Thai music styles. These popular Thai music genres indicate the different visions of Thai identity and Thainess and exemplify the distinct visions of unity and belonging among the Thai people (Eamsa-Ard, 2006).

Resemblances of the power of song in uniting the people too can be observed through Dangdut songs in an Indonesian context. Acting as a reflection of the goals and aspirations of the people, it also represents the identity of the people of Indonesia (Farid, 2021; Weintraub, 2006). Weintraub (2006) added that the authorities acknowledge the infusion of nationalism within Dangdut songs. It functions through a shared language that leads the people to sing together, creating a common culture for the people from various backgrounds. These songs are not solely produced for entertainment, where it commonly appears in public events but also function as an agent in structuring the meaning and definitions of the identity and unity of Indonesians. It also serves political benefits for the Indonesian government by joining the people together with one typical music, Dangdut. Therefore, Dangdut songs possess an essential role in governing the people's expected interests, shaping their identity, and constructing nationalism in Indonesia. Indigenous popular songs in Sarawak, specifically Iban pop songs, may hold power to unite people, similar to Dangdut songs.

It is questionable whether music shapes the identity of Sarawakians, specifically indigenous popular songs, and how music constructs their identity from the consumers' perspective. The integrated national identity proposed by the authority is contested by musicians mixing diverse musical styles and instruments (Tan, 2019). The Sarawak Rainforest World Music Festival (RWMF) created a stage bringing local and foreign artists together. These performances brought people together in a place, regardless of their ethnicities or nationalities. The workshops and the performances fused different types of traditional music and instruments to demonstrate the peaceful image of Sarawak through the texts that represent the richness of nature, particularly in Sarawak.

Jehom's (1999) study also claimed that ethnicity and ethnic identity are strenuous topics and highly problematic. The Brooke government and its successors employed the locally based or the everyday-defined identity and reformed it to suit the colonial definition of ethnicity. This ethnic construction is perplexing due to the cultural traits that constantly cross group boundaries. The concept of 'us' and 'them' among the indigenous people in Sarawak emerged when they sought to distinguish between themselves and the others. Self-awareness of one's belonging to a specific group causes self-ascription and self-identification.

Meanwhile, the study by Guan (2018) demonstrated that 63% of respondents initially recognized themselves as Sarawakian, and only about 25% identified themselves as Malaysian citizens. Furthermore, 83% of respondents stated that the state civil service should be managed by local officials rather than personnel from Peninsular Malaysia. The thought of more self-government also extends to having more locals in the state public services sector. The majority of the respondents in Sarawak also reject having Islam as the state religion, and 68% of Chinese respondents argued that there should not only be one type of school in the country to foster unity among all citizens.

People's various engagements with music, whether listening, playing, or performing, impact the neuro-chemicals in the brain that are formidable in emerging social connection and thickness (Suttie, 2016). Jerome et al. (2021) exposed that visions were co-created in and through a dynamic interaction between the song and the audience: the former evoked feelings of togetherness and involvement, and the latter formulated their visions of unity and belonging based on those feelings. The study suggests further studies on Malaysia's indigenous popular music concerning their roles in and contributions to the lengthy and never-ending process of unity, belonging, and identity formation in Malaysia (Jerome et al., 2021). Lueders (2016) also suggested conducting future research into other types of popular music and its representation of national identity to enhance the understanding of how popular music constructs and reproduces national identity.

With a systematic focus on song lyrics, Malaysian popular music does not delve profoundly into the emotional and cultural aspects (Adil & Hamzah, 2019). Therefore, it is well-timed to emerge an upgraded and more comprehensive study on Malaysian popular music. Currently, scholarship on Malaysian popular music is expanding with promise. However, there is a demand for more studies that emphasize the contributions of minority communities to Malaysian popular music (Adil & Hamzah, 2019).

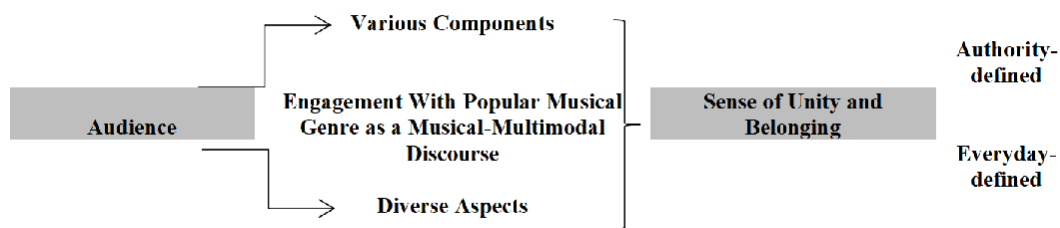
Previous research clearly shows that the issue of diversity (culture differences, distinct religions, and different ethnicity) might split up the people of the same nation. Culturally diverse societies like Sarawak face incorporating individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Previous research also argued that music develops the identities rather than the identity that develops and influences music, and music is discovered to play its role in developing the identity and ideology (Eamsa-Ard, 2006; Negus & Velazquez, 2002). Moreover, previous researches only focus on Britpop songs, popular songs written and sung in Malay, but there is a lack of studies focusing on the role of Indigenous popular songs. Hence, to fill in the research gap, the study in this paper investigated the role of popular music of Malaysia's indigenous ethnic minority communities in constructing national identity and shaping visions of unity in Malaysia on various levels. Specifically, the study examined the role of the Iban pop song, *Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis* by Andrew Ngalai, in creating a sense of unity and belonging among the people of Sarawak.

## 2.1. Theoretical Framework

It is important to note that the study highlighted in this article formed part of more significant research titled, "From *Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis* to Wawasan Bekikis Bulu Betis: Iban Pop Song and Visions of Unity: A Musical-Multimodal Discourse Analysis." This research was theoretically informed and guided by famous music scholars such as Tagg (1982, 2015) and Aleshinskaya (2013). They maintained that the popular music genre should be treated as a musical-multimodal discourse. They contended that this musical genre is made up of a multitude of components (e.g., text, social contexts, social roles, social agents, and semiosis) and diverse aspects (e.g., musicological, historical, technical, ritual, gestural, visual, psychological, linguistic, social). The music genres mentioned afford it to serve various audiences, including a channel through people creating their sense of togetherness and affiliation. One can see the components and aspects of the popular music genre converge to serve such a purpose: the audiences as social agents would play their social roles as members of a community in a specific social context and whose feelings of cohesion and attachment are evoked through their engagements with popular music, be it lyrically, sonically, visually or gesturally.

The more significant research also drew on the two social realities [Shamsul Amri \(1996\)](#) proffered to explain the sense of unity further and belonging that popular musical genres produce among people in multiethnic nation-states such as Malaysia. According to [Shamsul Amri \(1996\)](#), people’s sense of identity (which is not far removed from their feelings of solidarity and connectedness) in this country is regulated by two forces - the authority-defined (i. e., the elite governing bodies and local authorities) and the everyday-defined (i.e., the general public and the ordinary people). Popular musical genres, particularly in the case of indigenous popular music of the Iban in Sarawak, may create an everyday-defined rather than an authority-defined sense of unity and belonging among the people of Sarawak through their engagements with it. The following [Figure 1](#) explicates how the theories mentioned above were employed in the extensive research to investigate the subject in question.

Figure 1: The theoretical framework of the research on indigenous popular music of the Iban in Sarawak



### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Participants

[Table 1](#) shows the demographic characteristics of the participants of the survey. The number of participants who responded is 82, with 18 participants withdrawn from the confirmed list. The identified list of participants shows that the participants range from 16 to 64 years and above, live in Sarawak and have diverse ethnic backgrounds. The selection of criteria for the participants is their ethnic background. The study aims to observe their view of unity and belonging in Sarawak through the pop song of Iban *Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis*.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the participants

| Demographic characteristics |                        | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|-----------------------------|------------------------|-----------|----------------|
| Age                         | 5-19 years old         | 5         | 6.5            |
|                             | 20-24 years old        | 57        | 74             |
|                             | 25-29 years old        | 10        | 13             |
|                             | 30-34 years old        | 0         | 0              |
|                             | 35-39 years old        | 0         | 0              |
|                             | 40-44 years old        | 1         | 1.3            |
|                             | 45-49 years old        | 2         | 2.6            |
|                             | 50-54 years old        | 0         | 0              |
|                             | 55-59 years old        | 1         | 1.3            |
|                             | 60-64 years old        | 0         | 0              |
|                             | 64 years old and above | 1         | 1.3            |
| Gender                      | Male                   | 25        | 32.5           |
|                             | Female                 | 52        | 67.5           |

|   |                     |        |      |
|---|---------------------|--------|------|
| Ethnicity   | Malay               | 12     | 15.6 |
|   | Chinese             | 4      | 5.2  |
|   | Iban                | 41     | 53.2 |
|   | Melanau             | 9      | 11.7 |
|   | Bidayuh             | 8      | 10.4 |
|   | Kedayan             | 1      | 1.3  |
|   | Kenyah              | 1      | 1.3  |
|   | Kenyah + Iban       | 1      | 1.3  |
|   | Religion            | Muslim | 25   |
| Buddhism  |                     | 2      | 2.6  |
| Christian   |                     | 50     | 64.9 |
| Hinduism  |                     | 0      | 0    |
| Traditional Chinese religions and philosophies (Taoism, Confucianism, etc.) |                     | 0      | 0    |
| No religion   |                     | 0      | 0    |
| Place of origin (Division)  | Kuching             | 16     | 20.8 |
|   | Samarahan           | 5      | 6.5  |
|   | Serian              | 3      | 3.9  |
|   | Sri Aman            | 5      | 6.5  |
|   | Betong              | 1      | 1.3  |
|   | Sarikei             | 1      | 1.3  |
|   | Sibu                | 8      | 10.4 |
|   | Mukah               | 1      | 1.3  |
|   | Bintulu             | 22     | 28.6 |
|   | Kapit               | 1      | 1.3  |
|   | Miri                | 9      | 11.7 |
|   | Limbang             | 5      | 6.5  |
|   | Place of residence  | Urban  | 55   |
| Suburban  |                     | 13     | 16.9 |
| Rural   |                     | 9      | 11.7 |
| Education   | Primary             | 0      | 0    |
|   | Secondary           | 15     | 19.5 |
|   | Vocational          | 1      | 1.3  |
|   | Diploma             | 25     | 32.5 |
|   | Bachelor's Degree   | 35     | 45.5 |
|   | Master              | 1      | 1.3  |
|   | PHD                 | 0      | 0    |
| Occupation  | Employed            | 16     | 20.8 |
|   | Self-employed       | 4      | 5.2  |
|   | Unemployed          | 6      | 7.8  |
|   | Student             | 51     | 66.2 |
| Monthly income  | B40 (<RM3720)       | 54     | 70.1 |
|   | M40 (RM3720-RM8649) | 16     | 20.8 |
|   | T20 (>RM8649)       | 7      | 9.1  |

The public perception survey is created based on the Knowledge, Attitude, and Practices (KAP) model. According to [Andrade et al. \(2020\)](#), "it aims to elicit what is known (knowledge), believed (attitude), and done (practised) in the context of the topic of interest". The bilingual questionnaire (translation from English to Malay) was provided in the public perception survey to help the researchers or research assistants collect information from participants who might not read English as their second language well enough to comprehend the questions. The information of the study was collected through a quasi-structured questionnaire which consisted of closed-ended and open-ended questions using Google form. The closed-ended questions included multiple-choice, Likert

scale, and yes/no questions. The open-ended questions (short answer questions) allow the respondents not to be restricted to a fixed choice. The questionnaire consisted of 6 parts: a) a brief introduction with informed consent and instructions, b) demography of respondents, c) the knowledge of Iban pop songs in general (7 items), d) the attitude towards Iban pop songs in general (2 items) e) the practices towards Iban pop songs in general (5 items), and f) the knowledge, attitude, and practices towards Iban pop songs, specifically *Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis* by Andrewson Ngalai (9 items). However, the study only focuses on two open-ended questions in the last section of the survey about the people's perspective on Iban pop songs; *Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis* by Andrewson Ngalai specifically shows the data directly the overall aim of the research. Below are the two open-ended questions that were utilized for analysis and be presented in this study:

- i. In terms of being a Sarawakian, what do you think of when you hear this song?
- ii. Why do you agree that this song creates a sense of identity, unity, and belonging among the Sarawak community?

### 3.2. Data Collection

Before the actual data collection was conducted, the researchers started with a two-stage pilot study. A pilot study is a small practicality study or confirmatory investigation conducted to test various aspects of a planned method using a smaller sample size before implementing the method with a more extensive or more rigorous context (Arain, Campbell, Cooper, & Lancaster, 2010). The pilot study is necessary for a research project and valuable in providing a more extensive study (Zailinawati, Schattner & Mazza, 2006). Pilot testing is conducted to test the reliability and quality of the survey questionnaires and identify any problems with the questions faced by the participants through the feedback collected before improvisation is made. The survey created in a Google form was distributed through WhatsApp to the participants of the first stage of the pilot study.

After identifying the list of potential participants in the pilot study, the first stage involving 10 participants is conducted from 21st August to 22nd August. After getting the feedback from the first pilot study, necessary changes are made to the questionnaire accordingly before the researchers proceed with the second pilot testing involving ten different participants from 24th August to 27th August. The actual data collection through the snowball sampling method started from 30<sup>th</sup> August to 8<sup>th</sup> September with 30 initial Sarawakian participants of various backgrounds. According to Daniel (2012), the sample size for exploratory studies ranged from 20 to 150 participants. Therefore for this study, researchers had determined the target responses would be from around 100 participants to fit with the guidelines provided by Daniel (2012). Johnson (2014) stated that snowball sampling, also known as chain referral sampling, refers to a non-probability method of survey sample selection that is commonly used to locate rare or difficult-to-find populations. In other studies that utilize snowball sampling, these "hidden populations" might include drug consumers, people with deviant sexual behaviour, rare diseases unapproved by society, illegal immigrants, or people working in the black market (Dragan & Isaic-Maniu, 2013). Nevertheless, in this study, snowball sampling is used by researchers to reach out to participants residing in Sarawak so that the results obtained could represent Sarawak as a whole. By asking for help from the 30 initial participants to spread out the online survey form to their friends and relatives, researchers can get responses from participants that live in various parts of Sarawak, including the upper parts such as Limbang and Lawas.

### 3.3. Data Analysis

An adamant sample of 82 respondents from the Southern, Central, and Northern regions of Sarawak was interviewed to gather their thoughts on the famous Iban pop song, *Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis* by Andrewson Ngalai on how it helped create ideas about unity and belonging among Sarawakians. Females represented 52 or 67.5% of the sample, and most of the participants (57 or 74%) were aged between 20 and 24 years old. The participants represented the distinct ethnic groups in Sarawak: Malay (12 or 15.6%), Chinese (4 or 5.2%), Iban (41 or 53.2%), Melanau (9 or 11.7%), Bidayuh (8 or 10.4%), Kedayan (1 or 1.3%), Kenyah (1 or 1.3%) and Kenyah + Kedayan (1 or 1.3%). The participants varied in their religious beliefs, employment, and educational status. Then, all the interviews were transcribed and analyzed to identify (not complete yet will continue it).

### 4. Findings

The findings are presented according to the survey's two open-ended questions and 29 survey items that identify people's perspectives on the *Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis* song. [Table 2](#) shows the public perspective on the Iban pop song. Other than that, 34 survey items see how the *Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis* song can create visions of unity, identity, and belonging in Sarawak.

Table 2: Public perspective on *Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis* song

| Theme                               | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|-------------------------------------|-----------|----------------|
| The song makes people feel happy    | 6         | 7.32           |
| The song reminds me of events/place | 4         | 4.88           |
| The song makes people feel proud    | 15        | 18.29          |
| The song is popular                 | 5         | 6.10           |
| The song is fun                     | 10        | 12.20          |
| The song makes people dance         | 8         | 9.76           |
| The song brings back memories       | 2         | 2.44           |
| The song creates unity              | 11        | 13.41          |
| The song has good musical elements  | 11        | 13.41          |
| The song talks about culture        | 3         | 3.66           |
| The song creates Sarawak identity   | 2         | 2.44           |
| The song is a Sarawak song          | 2         | 2.44           |
| Others                              | 3         | 3.66           |
| Total                               | 82        | 100            |

The study reveals a prominent pattern regarding the song *Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis*. The majority of the respondents, comprising 18.29% (N=15), asserted that the song instils a sense of pride when listening to the song. The song is synonymous with celebrations and public events, which made the people proud of their state of origin, Sarawak. The respondents claimed that it is a symbol of being the people of Sarawak, representing their identity. The power of this song in uniting the people resembles that of *Dangdut* songs, where *Dangdut* represents Indonesian identity, as it is not exclusively for one group but belongs to everyone ([Weintraub, 2006](#)). In this case, the song is 'owned' by Sarawakians. It defines their identity and represents who they are and where they are from, which corresponds with a study by [Tan \(2019\)](#) claiming that indigenous music represents the image of Sarawak. Hence, the song functions as the identity of the people of Sarawak. Besides, the song also evokes a sense of belonging by feeling proud of their birthplace. In this case, Iban pop song music constructs the identity and the experiences of the people

besides connecting cultural identities by acting as a symbol of shared heritage among the people (Kattari, 2009; Negus & Velazquez, 2002). In addition, a sense of belonging is created through the song's symbolism as the identity of the people of Sarawak through the song *Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis*. The song functions as a tool that symbolizes their identity and their proudness of being the people of Sarawak.

Besides, it is also a catchy song, confirmed by 13.41% (N=11) of the participants. Another typical response with the same percentage claims that the song brings people together, encouraging people to dance and sing together regardless of their ethnic background. For instance, *Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis's* song claimed to foster unity by bridging the gap and "strengthen the bond between races" where they are "not only Iban (people) but most of the races here in Sarawak". As music is attached to the cultural and social issues of the people (Maglov, 2016), similar to Dangdut songs that address social issues (Farid, 2021), the people put aside social differences as they dance in unison to embrace togetherness culturally and socially. Similar to Australian indigenous songs, Iban pop song, in this case, forms a base for a multiethnic community and acts as a medium to construct the identity and the representation of the people as a whole (Guy, 2015; Jun Wu, 2014).

Another typical response comprising 12.20% (N=10) of the participants is associating the song with a fun song. It evokes positive emotions such as "enjoy", "having fun", "chill", relaxed, happy, and also functions as a stress-reliever. The entertaining feel-good song creates a pleasing atmosphere where the people feel comfortable around each other and eventually initiate social interactions. As a result, a bond is formed through the song, which acts as a common interest. Potter (2019) contends that it builds a mutual intercultural interaction between individuals. Thus, the identity, unity, and sense of belonging of the people of Sarawak are catered through the song *Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis*, from the emotions that the audiences associate the song with, which is happiness. Thus, the song *Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis* shapes identity, unity, and a sense of belonging through its music style (Eamsa-Ard, 2006; Weintraub, 2006) and evoking emotional behaviour such as nostalgic sense (Lueders, 2016) and happiness.

Furthermore, the study also investigated the perceptions of Sarawakians toward the Iban pop song *Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis* in creating a sense of identity, unity, and belonging among the Sarawak community. Based on Table 3, most of the responses gathered from the survey demonstrated that meaningful lyrics and iconic rhythm create a sense of identity, unity, and belonging among the Sarawak community at 21.95 % (N=18). Many respondents mentioned that the song lyrics have deep and purposeful meaning with powerful words. Besides the song's rhythm, a lively beat is affirmed to bring happiness and excitement. When the song is being played in events or festivities, everyone will automatically sing and dance without looking at their race and ethnicity. The statements match the perspective of numerous Iban pop songs regarding common themes of life. Certain songs convey unity and patriotism. The engagement of popular music strengthens the audience's consciousness of what goes on in the typical situations of their lives. Aside from listening to the song sonically, lyrically, or visually the audiences also string their listening and interpretation of the song together with their cogitations and state of affairs (Cavicchi, 2002 as cited in Jerome et al., 2021).

Table 3: *Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis* creates the visions of unity, identity, and belonging in Sarawak.

| Theme                              | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|------------------------------------|-----------|----------------|
| The popularity of the song         | 16        | 19.51          |
| The song commonly played at events | 3         | 3.66           |
| Elements of the song               | 18        | 21.95          |
| The song is enjoyed by everyone    | 15        | 18.29          |
| The song brings happiness          | 3         | 3.66           |
| The song brings people together    | 5         | 6.10           |
| Introduce ethnicities              | 2         | 2.44           |
| Pride of being Sarawakian          | 8         | 9.76           |
| Others                             | 5         | 6.10           |
| No answer                          | 7         | 8.54           |
| Total                              | 82        | 100            |

Apart from that, numerous responses from the survey demonstrated that the song's popularity also creates a sense of identity, unity, and belonging among the Sarawak community at 19.51% (N=16). The respondents claimed that the song is popular and familiar, particularly well-known by most audiences in Sarawak. It can transcend ethnicity where people from different ethnic groups can dance and sing along with the song, strengthening the intercultural ties in Sarawak. In addition, the respondent also claimed that people from west Malaysia, the whole of Malaysia, and even Indonesia could do so, which is consistent with the views that popular music performs as a crucial asset for establishing citizens' visions of unity and belonging. It influences how the populace feels about unity and their sense of connection within a group, a particular place, a region, or a country (Avelar & Dunn, 2011; Morra, 2014 as cited in Jerome et al., 2021). The previous research also asserted that this song had gained tremendous popularity among various audiences from the multiethnic audiences in Sarawak, West Malaysia, Sabah, Brunei, and Indonesia. The audiences, majorly from Sarawak, link the song with notions of local identity, unity, and belonging (buahemperingat n.d. as cited in Jerome et al., 2021).

The respondent claimed that the song is a familiar song that everyone enjoys and creates an engagement that binds people together by singing and dancing along regardless of their differences, such as race and religion. Furthermore, the typical responses mentioned the song as an enjoyable dancy, catchy, and sing-along song that creates a sense of identity, unity and belonging among the Sarawak community at 18.29% (N=15). Studies mentioned that people's various engagements with music, whether listening, playing, or performing, impact the neuro-chemicals in the brain that are formidable in emerging social connection and thickness (Suttie, 2016). The Malaysians gain access to their comprehension and perception of unity and belonging through musicking, primarily through their various engagements with the Iban pop song, such as listening, singing, dancing, performing, and reflecting on their individual experiences with it (Jerome et al., 2021).

In short, the study's findings displayed that a significant number of the respondents claimed that the song's popularity creates Sarawakian identity, unity, and belonging among them because the song makes them possess a sense of proudness. Thus, it is questionable whether or not an unpopular indigenous song is yet to foster unity. The study also demonstrated that the song *Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis* indeed shared its values and roles in shaping identity and promoting unity and a sense of belonging among the

Sarawakians. However, it is also noteworthy to heed the possibilities where confident respondents might perceive differently about the Iban pop song, in the sense that the songs from other indigenous groups in Sarawak. Meanwhile, the East Malaysian state of Sabah could also impact the people in Sarawak, particularly those living in the Northern region of Sarawak. As a result, the songs from other indigenous groups in Sarawak and the East Malaysian state of Sabah could also be focused on in the future study to catch an insight into their roles if these songs can also shape identity and promote unity among the Sarawakians.

## 5. Conclusion

The study examined the influence of indigenous popular music, *Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis*, an Iban pop song from Andrewson Ngalai, on unity and belonging among Sarawakians. The study's focus group consists of North, Central, and South Sarawak people from different ethnic groups. The study found that most participants stated that the song gives them a sense of pride when they listen to the music. The study also found that the song is synonymous with special occasions that make people proud of their origin, Sarawak. The second important finding was that the song *Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis* is also a symbol of belonging to the people of Sarawak. These findings are of great significance in understanding the role of indigenous popular music in fostering a sense of belonging among Malaysia's diverse communities. The current implementation of secure working procedures (SOP) limits the control over the data collected from the participants. Future studies should attempt to conduct data collection to optimize data collection. The study experienced fraud such as incomplete responses apart from sudden withdrawals of participants without notice. With a printed survey, sudden withdrawals can be avoided. In addition, the survey is limited to Sarawak residents born in Sarawak. Moreover, the data analyzed is limited to two items selected from the survey. More in-depth knowledge can be obtained from other items.

As recommended, this survey should be conducted physically to maximize the data collection. Besides, future research may analyze the data by implementing a more suitable framework to discover a pattern from the survey. On the other hand, the findings demonstrated that the song's popularity creates a sense of identity, unity, and belonging among the Sarawak community. However, the indigenous song is claimed to be able to foster unity among the Sarawakians, in this case, the song *Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis*. The song is well-known by most audiences in Sarawak and can strengthen the intercultural ties in Sarawak. However, Sarawakians' unity, sense of belonging, and proudness in being the people of Sarawak might be due to the song's popularity. Hence, as mentioned before, future studies should examine the other indigenous songs, in this case, a somehow unpopular indigenous song that deserves more recognition to know whether or not the unpopular indigenous song still can shape the identity, unity, and belonging among the Sarawakians. Moreover, the future study could also give a focal point on the songs from other indigenous groups in Sarawak or the East Malaysian state of Sabah to gain insight into their roles in shaping identity and facilitating a sense of togetherness among the Sarawakians.

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## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of Interest.

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