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PRESERVING INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE: PLANNING FOR A DIGITAL AUDIOVISUAL ARCHIVES FOR SABAH AND WIDER BORNEO

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Abstract

The preservation of intangible cultural heritage (ICH), such as music, dance, language, indigenous law and other oral traditions and practices, is essential for peoples who are experiencing rapid culture change. This enables them to access and understand their cultural past as a valuable preparation for the future. Unlike tangible cultural heritage such as sites, monuments, and objects that can endure for centuries, intangible cultural heritage exists only momentarily. It is traditionally preserved in the minds of its practitioners. When these experts pass away, the intangible cultural heritage may be lost. This heritage can be preserved by its continual performance and by passing it on to the next generation, by writing it down through descriptive transcription, or by recording it. Various recording procedures have been used throughout the past century to record intangible cultural heritage, and today older analogue data can be digitised. But there are inherent difficulties in this process. This article examines the UNESCO Convention for Safeguarding the Intangible Cultural Heritage and issues arising thereof. It discusses processes of transcription and especially the recording of intangible cultural heritage. Finally, it proposes the planning and establishment of an audiovisual archives in Kota Kinabalu to preserve the intangible cultural heritage of all ethnic groups in Sabah and wider Borneo that will also ensure that the indigenous property rights of the people are preserved.

Keywords: intangible cultural heritage, preservation, audiovisual archives, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah

INTRODUCTION

Sabah, the northernmost region of Malaysia on Borneo Island, is home to around sixty ethnic groups, of whom over thirty-five speak languages from the ancient indigenous Dusunic, Murutic and Paitanic Families of Austronesian Languages. There are also several Sama-Bajau groups, the Iranun, and others from other parts of Borneo and beyond (Pugh-Kitingan, Miller, Wong, Petrus Atin, Porodong, Lajumin & Kluge, 2018; Malaysia: Sabah, 2021). Each group has its own distinctive tangible and intangible cultural heritage.

This article looks at the nature of the intangible cultural heritage (ICH) of Sabah and the importance of its preservation. It begins by discussing definitions of intangible cultural heritage. Then it looks briefly at the types of this heritage found in Sabah, and the main sources of research that has been conducted on this. It also discusses the importance of access to ICH for people to develop a capacity to deal with change in their lives.

Methods of preserving this heritage are discussed, and problems associated with this in Sabah are outlined, especially the lack of digitisation and archiving facilities. Finally, it proposes the establishment of a properly planned and managed audiovisual archives to maintain recordings, photographs, films and other sources of intangible cultural heritage.

This springs from the needs of the writer as an ethnomusicologist, as well as some former postgraduate students, and other researchers in Sabah and also Kalimantan, who have expressed the necessity for a safe and secure repository for the storage and preservation of their audiovisual research data. Most government museums in Borneo concentrate on storing materials from their particular State or Province, but many do not have adequate digitisation facilities. Other non-government charitable organisations are focussed on specific cultures in the region. The Tun Jugah Foundation of Sarawak, for example, administers several departments that include an excellent archive. But it is focused mainly on Iban cultures (The Tun Jugah Foundation, n.d.).

DEFINITIONS OF INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE (ICH)

The 2003 UNESCO *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* defines Intangible Cultural Heritage as:

“the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills—as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces associated therewith—that communities, groups and in some cases individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and it provides them with a sense

of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.”

Its Article 2 of the Convention states:

“The ‘intangible cultural heritage’, as defined in paragraph 1 above, is manifested inter alia in the following domains:

- (a) oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage;
- (b) performing arts;
- (c) social practices, rituals and festive events;
- (d) knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe;
- (e) traditional craftsmanship.”

Some ethnomusicologists and other cultural researchers, however, question elements of this definition and its Article 2. “Instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces” are regarded primarily as elements of tangible cultural heritage or material culture, although as sound-producers musical instruments might be linked to ICH in terms of their music.

The idea that ICH is transmitted simply “from generation to generation” does not allow for change over time. Cultural interactions of communities with other groups do produce elements of cultural convergence in their ICH (Ku, 2019; Pugh-Kitingan, 2004, pp.185-198; 2019; 2024a).

The use of the term “performing arts” in Article 2 reflects Western ideas about music, dance and other performative genres, rather than the ethnosemantic concepts of many traditional societies across the world. Similarly, there is an overlap in many traditional societies between “rituals” and “knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe” in Article 2. Yet these are separated as different categories in Article 2.

The concept of “performing arts” is often equated with music and dance as “the arts”. Yet for many cultures in the world, this concept of “the arts” is foreign and does not adequately express the nature and purpose of their knowledge and ICH genres.

Thus, for this writer, John Blacking’s definitions of music as “sound that is organised into socially accepted patterns,” and music making as “a form of learned human behaviour” (Blacking, 1995, p. 33), are preferred because they allow for wide cultural diversity as well as change in the intangible cultural heritage. Similarly, Adrienne Kaeppler’s definition of dance as “a structured-movement system of knowledge” (Kaeppler, 2005, pp. 295-296) covers dance in all its forms and contexts, whether in ritual or social secular settings. Apart from

these, ICH embodies indigenous legal systems, traditional medicinal practices, and other forms of traditional knowledge.

THE ICH OF SABAH AND RESEARCH

Sabah has a rich diversity of ICH, that includes wide varieties of oral literature, music, and dance, many forms of traditional knowledge, indigenous law, ritual and other practices. The main categories of oral literature encompass riddles, folktales, epics, legends of oral history, myths embodied in long sacred poetic ritual chants such as the genres of *rinait* (sometimes called *inait* or *buntuh*) that are recited or chanted by priestesses of the traditional religions among Dusunic, Paitanic and Murutic peoples, and secular vocal music (Photo 1). Oral literature also includes various other poetic genres, secular songs, different types of call-and-response singing, such as group verse debates spontaneously sung back and forth during circulating line dancing (Pugh-Kitingan, 2019; Regis, Pugh-Kitingan & John Baptist, 2003; Sather, 1975; Smith & Hassin, 2011; Subinon, 2016).



Photo 1: The late Odun Rinduman, the *tantagas lawid* or “high priestess” of the Lotud Dusun, chanting *rinait* long during during rituals at Kampung Bantayan Tuaran

Source: Jacqueline Pugh-Kitingan, 16 June 2003

Apart from these, there are many varieties of solo and group instrumental music. Solo instruments are traditionally performed in secular contexts for personal expression, while group ensembles accompany ceremonial and also ritual events. Solo instruments include aerophones such as endblown and transverse flutes, nose flutes, mouthorgans including the renowned *sompoton* of the Kadazan Dusun (see Plate 2), and orally-resonated lamellaphones or palmwood jews harps, and chordophones including bamboo tube zithers and long-necked strummed or plucked lutes, as well as rare bowed lutes. Membranophones such as single drums or occasionally frame drums (in some coastal communities) are normally played with ensembles of idiophones (Pugh-Kitingan, 2004, 19, 30-39).

Sabah's idiophones consist of ensembles of different kinds of brass hanging gongs, that vary according to culture, and the *kulintangan* row of small kettle gongs. Gong ensembles are found in all Sabahan cultures with interior ethnic groups having large numbers of hanging gongs. The *kulintangan*, however, is normally only played among certain coastal communities or interior groups with river access to the coasts. Apart from these metallophones, groups of bamboo idiophones known as *tagunggak* in Murutic languages or *togunggak* in Dusunic languages are also played as substitutes for gongs in some contexts, and some cultures have wooden xylophones (Pugh-Kitingan 2004, 22-30).

There is not room here to discuss all the studies that have been conducted over the years on the vocal ICH of Sabah. Only some key long-term research projects will be mentioned.

The Sabah Oral Literature Project of anthropologists George and Laura Appell, who spent years of research among the Rungus of northern Sabah, is one of the largest bodies of documented oral literature from Borneo. Together with their Rungus friends and informants, the Appells recorded and transcribed the texts of the many different genres of Rungus oral literature, from *longoi* (secular songs) to *rinait* (C.R. Appell, 2022; G.N. Appell, 2011). Inspired by the work of the Appells, some younger scholars, community members, and cultural associations have conducted further research on the oral literature of their cultures (Morie, 2019, 2022; Olim Marsh, 1988; Roland, 2020, 2022; Simeon, 2022; Simeon & Pugh-Kitingan, 2021).

Researchers of SIL Malaysia, also known as the *Institut Linguistik SIL-Cawangan Malaysia* (Summer Institute of Linguistics – Malaysia Branch) have conducted detailed linguistics research among most of the ethnic groups of Sabah under a Memorandum of Understanding with the Sabah Government since 1977, and more recently with Universiti Malaysia Sabah. They have worked continuously with indigenous communities to produce many linguistic research papers, dictionaries, trilingual phrase books, and other documents including books of folktales (see for example Brewis, K., 1991 and Brewis, R., 1986).

Former staff of Sabah Museum including Judeth John Baptist, formerly Senior Curator, and Patricia Regis, a former Director, have conducted in-depth research on the *rinait* kept by traditional priestesses among indigenous ethnic groups. Judeth's extensive research includes the *rinait* of the Lotud of Tuaran District, the *inait* of the Kadazan of Penampang District, and the *rinait* of the Kujau of Keningau District, as well as that of other ethnic groups (Cai, John Baptist, Pugh-Kitingan, & Hussin, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c, 2022d).

There have been changes in the intangible cultural heritage of Sabah. While ritual chanting has declined, gong ensembles continue to be markers of distinctive local cultures, and are played in newer contexts such as state and national festivals, church events and on other occasions. Traditional secular singing has led to the development of indigenous pop music genres and also modern church singing. Solo secular instruments, however, are declining as new electronic digital media are replacing traditional genres.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PRESERVING ICH

For many people, especially those from the indigenous Austronesian ethnic groups, their ICH reflects their distinctive ethnic identities. The loss of traditional knowledge about ICH due to the demise of older knowledge-bearers and inroads made by new digital entertainment media is regarded with alarm.

Traditional musicians, such as *sompoton* player Thadius Yongut from Tambunan (Plate 2), sadly note that nowadays many village children not only lack knowledge of their own culture's solo instruments, but are no longer interested in playing even introduced instruments such as the guitar. Instead, they are obsessed with playing games on their cellphones. With the decline in performance of traditional long-necked lutes and other solo instruments in several communities, some young people have formed associations to revive these. But lack of knowledge due to the passing of older musicians creates some difficulties in cultural continuity (Pugh-Kitingan, 2024b).



Photo 2: En. Thadius Yongut of Kg. Tikolod, Tambunan
playing his *sompoton* mouthorgan
Source: Jacqueline Pugh-Kitingan 17 June 1985

Thus, the preservation of intangible cultural heritage is not merely an academic exercise, but is vital for the social health of cultures and communities undergoing change. As the Appells observed, access to the ICH of one's culture enhances the capacity to deal with change among all peoples.

“The essential feature of the capacity to deal with change is an appreciation of the past and where one has come from. Thus, people can deal with change when they know that their past was a valuable experience in preparation for the future, when their past is viewed in such positive terms as a foundation for dealing with change. On the other hand, when it is devalued, when it is lost and not available for reference in history books, in ethnographies, in museums, people become lost. They can become apathetic with the loss of their roots. Or they can become normless, without any guideposts to help them deal with the future. And so they throw themselves into the mental opium of sexual excess, excess of

alcohol, mindless entertainment, drugs, whatever” (G.N. Appell, 1986, p. 33).

This raises the question of how to preserve intangible cultural heritage for future generations.

HOW TO PRESERVE ICH

Intangible cultural heritage can be preserved essentially through three main techniques: performing it, recording it visually and aurally, and transcribing or writing it down. In terms of performance, older practitioners can perform their genres for recording or train younger performers if that is appropriate. In terms of recording, photographic, film and audio recordings can be used to record and document intangible cultural heritage. In terms of transcribing it, descriptive musical transcription using Western staff notation, or cipher notation, or other specially-invented types of notation appropriate to the recorded genre in question can be used by the researcher.

Formerly, older analogue technology was used to record intangible cultural heritage. In Sabah, this included the use of photographic glass slides by G.C. Woolley, an officer of the North Borneo Company from the early 1900s. Woolley’s collections of slides, diaries and artifacts later formed part of the collection of Sabah Museum, as well as for the Sabah State Archives and some of his diaries are kept with the Sabah State Library.

From the mid-twentieth century, slide transparencies and photographic prints were used by researchers and others who were keen to document Sabah’s heritage. Sound recordings were made with open-reel tapes and cassette recordings, and could even be used for compiling LP records in the local contemporary music industry. Even some of this writer’s recordings were made using open-reel and cassette tapes. Analogue recordings and slide transparencies, however, have limited lifespans.

Digitalisation has enabled the preservation of older analogue recordings, photographs and films, even those over a century old, in many parts of the world. But the digitisation of audiovisual materials is not readily available in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, nor in most other places of Malaysia.

PROBLEMS WITH PRESERVATION OF ICH IN SABAH

There are no proper archives devoted exclusively to the preservation and digitisation of existing intangible cultural heritage in Kota Kinabalu at present. As for access to digitisation facilities, there was one photographic shop that formerly digitised slides, but this has since closed. A new shop in a shopping complex has now opened, but staff have problems producing the correct digital size and their products are quite poor in quality. The Sabah State Archives, whose

main role is to archive historical government documents, is starting to digitise some of the analogue recordings of stories in its own collection. The digitisation of musical tapes and photographic slides and films, however, is still not readily available in Kota Kinabalu.

In Peninsular Malaysia, Universiti Malaya and Sunway University in Kuala Lumpur have facilities for the digitisation of analogue audiovisual materials held in their collections. In Penang, the Penang House of Music was a centre for the digitisation of analogue recordings. Unfortunately, this Penang House of Music that housed many valuable collections of recorded music, has recently been closed down.

Formerly, taped recordings of story telling and linguistic data by researchers of SIL Malaysia were sent to PARADISEC in Australia for copying and digitisation. PARADISEC was originally established by Prof. Emeritus Linda Barwick of the Sydney Conservatorium of Music. It is one of the few regionally located places that specialises in the digitisation of analogue tapes at a professional level.

Copies of the recordings collected under the Appell's Sabah Oral Literature Project, are kept with a trusted and reliable member of the Rungus culture. Researchers from other parts of Borneo, however, have expressed the need for an audiovisual archives that also digitises analogue recordings, films and photographs. Since Kota Kinabalu is regionally centred for Borneo and other parts of Southeast Asia, it is suggested that an audiovisual archives be established here.

PLANNING AN AUDIOVISUAL ARCHIVES IN SABAH

There is clearly a need for the proper planning and establishment of an audiovisual archives in Sabah. This will help to preserve and protect the intangible cultural heritage of Sabah's peoples for future generations. It could also serve the wider Borneo region.

The audiovisual archives could be established in Kota Kinabalu, possibly at Universiti Malaysia Sabah. Its holdings, however, should also be copied and stored securely among other bodies, such as the Sabah Museum, the Sabah State Archives, the Centre for Borneo Studies of the Sabah Foundation, and other properly established bodies. This would help to protect its holdings should any disaster befall the archives.

The archives would be tasked with the preservation and conservation of recordings and documentations of Sabah's intangible cultural heritage. It should have state of the art facilities for existing analogue recordings, films, slides and photographs to be digitised and preserved. Newer digital materials would be maintained and conserved. Properly trained staff would be needed for digitisation and for preserving the older analogue originals. Thus, the archives would require

its own building with a laboratory, and large sections for storing hard data, while copies could be scanned for cloud storage.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In establishing the audiovisual archives, the ethics of keeping intangible cultural heritage must be strictly adhered to. Thus, the intellectual property rights of those recorded should be fully recognised and acknowledged. The permissions and acknowledgements of the recordists should also be strictly adhered to in the archives and all affiliate organisations so that the heritage collections cannot be discarded or destroyed.

The same ethnical compliance requirements, intellectual property rights of the people and communities recorded, and informed consent of the recordists should be applied to the access of all forms of data in the archives. This includes all still photographs, sound recordings of music, interviews and other data, films, and any accompanying field notes or diagrams.

There have been alleged cases in parts of Malaysia where priceless recordings have been mishandled or destroyed. There have also been alleged examples of foreign visitors having access to recorded interviews and illegally publishing transcripts from these without the informed consent of the recordist nor any acknowledgements of the sources. Problems such as these can be avoided, and the recorded ICH of Sabah's peoples can be preserved if proper ethical standards are enforced.

CONCLUSIONS

Sabah has many ethnic groups, each with its own rich diversity of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Access to their intangible cultural heritage provides a valuable link to the past for people experiencing cultural change as they look to the future.

While some field recordings of intangible cultural heritage in Sabah have been kept privately by members of the host cultures, there remains a need for the proper planning and establishment of an audiovisual archives to maintain and preserve Sabah's intangible cultural heritage for future generations. It is suggested that such an archives be established as a distinct body in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, possibly at Universiti Malaysia Sabah. Copies of its holdings should also be stored with other established bodies such as Sabah Museum, the Sabah State Archives, the Centre for Borneo Studies of the Sabah Foundation and other organisations managing heritage collections, provided they respect the indigenous intellectual property rights and the informed consent of the recordists in the use of any of these materials.

The proposed archives could become a repository for intangible cultural heritage for other Borneo cultures beyond Sabah. In this way, the intangible

cultural heritage of Borneo can be maintained for future generations. This will serve to fill the needs of skilled local indigenous practitioners, their communities, and serious researchers and scholars across Borneo.

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