

## Malay Music Transmission: Social Practices and Community Perception

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### Abstract

*Malaysia is part of the Malay cultural family of the archipelago (Nusantara). Musical elements and structures are similar to those found in Indonesian traditions. However, the local people's social practices and natural perceptions differ. This study looks into the social practices and musical perceptions of Malaysian societies. Interviews, focused group discussions, observations, a literature review, and internet data retrieval were all used in this qualitative study. The findings indicate that social practices of Malay Music differ among sub-ethnic groups in Malaysia. The sub-ethnic perceptions regarding "local" Malay Music differs as well. Several factors influence the natural perception of Malaysian music. The country's cultural diversity, natural setting, and historical legacy are all closely related to how Malaysian music is perceived. Malaysian music frequently reflects a strong sense of place and is influenced by the country's natural surroundings, ethnic traditions, and landscapes.*

**Keywords:** Malay Music, Malaysia, Malayness, Music Transmission, Social Practice

### INTRODUCTION

Malay culture is one of the oldest civilizations in the Nusantara. Many people misunderstand what "Malay" means when discussing Malay music. In Indonesian, 'Malay' is known as 'Melayu.' Melayu of "Melayu" or "Malay-ness", defined as 'stock,' race, and ethnicity based on biological appearances during the colonial period, implies a core set of ideas, values, beliefs, tastes, behaviours, and experiences people share across geographical regions and past events (Barnard & Maier, 2004; Weintraub, 2014). Regardless of how extensive and dispersed the ethnic Malays are, the term cannot represent a single discourse, practice, or shared experience within a specific group (Barnard & Maier, 2004). Understanding and discovering the roots of Malay culture are constantly evolving and not fixed, including what is understood about culture, language, and identity, which are all situational and highly contextualized (Andaya, 2001). In the literature, the term tends to be used to refer to social groups (Andaya, 2001; Barnard & Maier, 2004; Matusky, 1985, 2020; Weintraub, 2014; Yampolsky, 1996). Weintraub emphasizes that Malay (Melayu) society as an ethnic group differs from racialized groups. Ethnic groups are more likely to be related to their location, such as the straits of Malacca and Riau. In contrast, Malay as a racial group refers to people who live in modern Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam, Singapore, and southern Thailand (Weintraub, 2014). Malay ethnic groups, according to Yampolsky, are the primary focus of Malay culture, while racial groups are the secondary focus (Yampolsky, 1996). Malay culture is shown by the commonality of physical performance (Malay), language (Melayu), religion (Islam), and performance (clothing codes). In Malaysia, the ethnic claims of Malay must cover all these aspects. So, a Malay must be physically aware of Malay and speak Melayu, Islam, and Malay dressing. In this study, Malay music is defined as the music performed by sub-ethnics of the Malay, such as Bugis, Minang, Javanese, and the native Malay itself. Musics of India's descendants and the Chinese are excluded from the category since those are perceived as music from outside.

The transmission of Malay music epitomizes a complex interplay of entrenched social customs and communal perceptions. It transcends mere dissemination of musical knowledge and skills, encompassing the sacrosanct task of safeguarding local values, cultural identity, and communal solidarity (Shah, 2013). This intricate process manifests through multifarious conduits, including oral traditions, formal educational endeavors, communal

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festivities and performances, and interactions within social milieu. These ingrained practices serve as bulwarks, fortifying the venerable status of Malay music within the communal fabric while ensuring its enduring legacy for posterity. Integral to village rituals and ceremonial rites, Malay music assumes a pivotal role in perpetuating ancient religious paradigms and fostering communal harmony (Nicolas, 2019). Nevertheless, myriad challenges loom large in the endeavor to preserve and perpetuate Malay music, particularly among the burgeoning cohort of the younger generation. These challenges encompass the burgeoning predilection for mainstream music over typical melodies, and the pervasive influence wielded by mass media and the internet, which portends the desacralization of hallowed ritual spaces and the gradual erosion of musical customs.

## **METHOD**

### **Interviews**

The present study employs a qualitative methodology to critically evaluate the previous research on Malay music and its social practices. We checked the literature and confirmed it through interviews with Malaysian informants directly. In June 2023, we interviewed music scholars and Malaysians interested in Malay music. There were two types of interviews: unstructured interviews with single informants and interviews in focus groups. Focus groups were used to identify critical issues concerning the existence of Malay music and musicians in Malaysia, as well as their transmission, interaction, and preservation. Focus group discussions were conducted to gain an in-depth understanding of the participants' perspectives, beliefs, and experiences relating to the social landscape of Malaysians and diasporas settled in Malaysia, social practices among their group communities, and how they see music as part of social interactions (see: Wilkinson, 1998).

### **Document Review**

The study utilized document analysis as a method to examine and analyze various documents related to the traditional Malay music transmission. A document analysis was adopted to gain a detailed understanding of Malay music. Documents from written texts, such as books, reports, and transcripts, journal articles, conferences, and audio-visual files obtained from digital platforms such as YouTube, wiki pages, specialized websites, and other recordings were examined (see: Moilanen et al., 2022). The review of documents was always accompanied by interviews, which continued throughout the research. As (Bowen, 2009) pointed out, this research also applies document review, which reinforces grounded theory. By conducting a thorough review and analysis of these documents, we were able to gain deeper insights and understanding of the social-musical practices.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS**

A common view amongs interviewees was that Malay music strongly emphasises preservation and multiculturalism. Malays, Chinese, Indians, indigenous peoples, and other ethnic groups have distinctive musical traditions, and Malaysia is home to various groups. According to one source (interview, June 2023), what is meant by Malay traditional music is music played and performed by indigenous Malay people such as indigenous Melayu, Bugis, Minang, Javanese, Sundanese and others from Nusantara Archipelago. That is why musics of the Indias and the Chinese are not categorized as Malay traditional music. This categorical claim of “Malay traditional music” has created problem with Indonesia since what are claimed as traditional Malay music are mostly musics from parts of Indonesian communities. The people who perform traditional Malay musics are people of second, third, fourth or more generations of migrants from Indonesia. When they migrated to Malaysia they brought with them the traditions and musics from parts of Indonesia; and that is why the claim was justified.

The ethnic diversity of the country heavily influences Malaysian traditional music. Malay music has a group of instruments consisting of idiophone, membranophone, aerophone and chordophone groups (Matusky, 1985). Instruments used in Malay music include the rebab (a three-stringed), gamelan (a percussion ensemble), and various traditional drums. It is frequently heard accompanying traditional dance forms such as Joget and Zapin. Traditional Chinese music, including instruments such as the guzheng (zither), pipa (lute), and erhu (two-stringed fiddle), has been preserved by Malaysia's Chinese community. Malaysian Indians brought classical music forms such as Carnatic and Hindustani music with them. In these genres, instruments such as the *tabla*, *sitar*, and flute

are commonly used. Local people are exposed to wood and bamboo, bronze (such as gongs), and drum-type instruments.

Some places in Malaysia are still the epicenter of traditional Malay music, including Kelantan, Terengganu, and Pahang. Kelantan is one of the few Malaysian states where traditional Malay music is still practiced. *Gendang silat*, *rebana*, and other traditional musical instruments are frequently used in cultural art performances and religious ceremonies. Terengganu also has a rich Malay music tradition. Musical instruments such as *gambus*, *serunai*, and Malay drums (*Gendang*) are frequently used in traditional art performances in this region. Malay music is still practiced in Pahang, particularly as part of cultural arts such as Malay shadow puppetry and other traditional performances. Malay shadow puppetry and other indigenous performances endure amidst a dwindling cadre of traditional music enthusiasts. Notwithstanding this decline, pockets of unwavering dedication to traditional Malay music persist in locales such as Kelantan, Terengganu, and Pahang within Malaysia. The fervent preservation and commemoration of traditional Malay musical forms in these specific regions represent a vital bastion for the perpetuation of the country's cultural ethos and ancestral legacy. Revered as an indelible facet of Malaysia's cultural tapestry, traditional Malay music finds sanctuary in enclaves such as Kelantan, Terengganu, and Pahang, where its customs and traditions remain steadfastly entrenched.

### Social Practices and Government Policies

Malay music is deeply rooted in the cultural traditions and customs of the Malay community in Malaysia and other parts of Southeast Asia. Malay music holds significance in many aspects of Malay society, including religious, social, and cultural contexts. Local musicians continue to use traditional musical instruments as a cultural identity while articulating a multicultural civilization. The preservation of Islamic identity values is very strong in Malaysian Malay musical elements. Although the invasion of contemporary culture has supplanted today's traditional or Malay music culture, they retain their original values because the Malay indigenous and ethnic diasporas (such as Bugis, Minangs, Javanese, Sundanese) are still scattered and robust in various corners of Malaysia. Malay music is still carried out, particularly by indigenous and immigrant communities who cherish the Nusantara's distinct musical culture. Weddings, circumcisions (*khitan*), and childbirth (*berzanji*) are all examples of life cycle events. Traditional Malay songs and musical performances mark these occasions. Traditional Malay music and dance in wedding ceremonies, in particular, are central features of the festivities, symbolizing joy, unity, and cultural identity. Cultural festivals, such as the yearly cultural celebrations and occasions like the Sultan's birthday, feature traditional Malay music prominently. These festivals frequently feature gamelan bands, shadow puppet shows called *wayang kulit*, and traditional dance performed to live music.

Malay music is frequently used for enjoyment and amusement at social events and during free time. Singing traditional songs (*pantun*) and playing musical instruments like the guitar and accordion are frequent features of casual get-togethers with friends and family. On the other hand, Malay pop music and modern genres have grown in popularity in urban areas, helping to create a thriving music scene in Malaysia. Malaysian communities place a high value on preserving their musical traditions. This includes both performing traditional music and passing down knowledge and skills to future generations. Community-based music schools and cultural organizations are frequently involved in efforts to preserve traditional music. There is a growing trend in urban areas and among younger generations of blending traditional Malaysian music with contemporary genres such as pop, rock, and so on. This style fusion is seen as a means of keeping traditional music relevant to modern audiences. Fusion music styles and other cultural influences are still prevalent in Malaysia's Malay and popular music landscapes.

The government's policy covers all music from the Malay sub-ethnic groups—Javanese, Minang, Batak, Makasar, Sundanese, etc.—. There are two ethnic groups, India and China, who have been parts of Malaysian culture for very long period, but have never been acknowledged as part of Malay culture. Even though these two ethnic groups have embraced Islam and Malay culture, music with roots in Chinese and Indian traditions is not considered Malay music. The reason is that these two cultures are not parts of Malay Nusantara traditional culture (source: focused group discussion, June 2023).

Malaysia government supports the existence of traditional Malay music (note: other traditional musics as well) through policies both at national and local levels. In educational institutions, cultural organizations, and music

schools, efforts are being made to preserve and transmit traditional Malay music to upcoming generations. These schools provide instruction in traditional dance and music from Malaysia. Cultural organizations and government programs also organise workshops, seminars, and festivals to encourage people to appreciate and comprehend Malay music. This idea is further supported by the existence of student organizations and music activists who promote Malay music at various events.

As traditional (Malay) music is an oral tradition, it is passed down through rote teaching from older to younger musicians (Matusky, 1985, 2020). Students learn by imitating older and more experienced musicians in this manner. Because once a student is able to play a musical instrument to a certain degree, the overall improvement in their skills as a performer takes place in actual performances, which can be either public or private. Traditional musicians' skills are generally not restricted to a single musical genre or instrument. As a result, a musician can usually play music for a variety of different musical forms.

### **Musical Instruments**

Music scholars conducted a general study of Malay music in 1974, focusing on the field of performance art (Matusky, 1985). Several studies on the classification and stylistic variations of musical instruments in Malaysia's Western and Eastern regions were conducted in the states of Kelantan and the Northeast (D'Cruz, 1979; Ku Zam Zam, 1978; Nasaruddin, 1976). To this day, instrument classifications such as idiophones, membranophones, aerophones, and chordophones are an important part of Malay music history. Idiophones are musical instruments made of naturally sonorous materials, and technique is essential in this class of instruments because idiophonic instruments often originate from the action or movement of striking, clapping the hands, or stamping the feet. This major category and its sub-classes include instruments single-struck or struck together, stamped, shaken, or plucked. Metal, wood, and bamboo idiophones such as gamelan or gong, gambang, and angklung are among the struck, stamped, and shaken idiophones.

The "gendang" and "rebana" types of membranophone instruments are also used in Malay traditional music. There are two types of "gendang": those of Malay and Javanese origin (that are larger), and those of Geduk and Nengkara origin. Examples of aerophone classifications are flutes, reeds, and trumpets, such as seruling, serunai, nafiri, and engkerurai. In Malay music, the chordophone family includes the sub-groups of lutes, zithers, and harps and an inventory of musical instruments in each item. Gambus, Sape, Kecapi, Rebab, and Engkeratong are examples of musical instruments. This elucidation is a brief and straightforward explanation of the entire landscape of Malay musical instruments, with particular reference to the researcher's previous research.

Malay music in Malaysia, like the Nusantara-Malay region, generally employs traditional musical instruments in certain traditional ceremonies. Yet, some are also used for entertainment, both individually and in groups (Matusky, 1985). Percussion instruments have been (and continue to be) central to Malay music. Nonetheless, the function of string instruments has become increasingly important in recent years in demonstrating cultural diversity. This phenomenon is shown by the music project "Brahmastra" (a Malay-Singapore ethnic music group). They bring the spirit of the "sound of diversity" to promote multicultural musical traditions that continue to bring the spirit of Malay music's togetherness.



**Figure 1.** The "Brahmastra" ensemble performed "Sound of diversity."

The National Arts Council of Singapore has funded the Brahmastra project. It is a project with the potential to promote Malay music's diversity and multiculturalism. The interaction of musicians from various genres and backgrounds allows for an intense cross-pollination of styles, information, techniques, scales, patterns, understanding, and collaborative experiences. That is why it has been such a fruitful project in recent years. Each member brings their own cultural and musical style to the table and melds it into a new form of music that still emphasizes the scales and families of Malay music. They understand how to represent their region's culture and musical traditions, which is why the concept of multicultural music has piqued the interest of many parties.

### **Community Perception and Technology Age**

Malaysian music's social practices and community perceptions are influenced by the country's diverse cultural landscape and historical context. Because Malaysia is a multicultural country, each ethnic community has its own music traditions. However, there is a prevalent appreciation for Malaysian music as a whole. Malaysians are often proud of their diverse musical heritage, seen as a unifying factor that highlights the country's cultural richness. Malaysia is a member of the archipelago's Malay cultural family (Nusantara). Musical elements and structures are reminiscent of Indonesian traditions. However, the social practices and natural perceptions of the locals differ. This study investigates Malaysian societies' social practices and musical perceptions. The findings underscore a profound sense of camaraderie and cohesion within distinct ethnic enclaves, rather than a cohesive national unity (Jerome et al., 2022). This underscores the intricate and ongoing endeavor to foster a collective national ethos, sense of belonging, and identity in Malaysia through the prism of popular music. In the swiftly evolving contemporary milieu, the indispensability of precise weather prognostications cannot be overstated. The propagation of traditional Malay music predominantly unfolds via informal educational avenues, such as immersion in prevalent musical genres and cultural customs in everyday life (Shah, 2006). This dissemination is molded by myriad factors, including the ubiquitous proliferation of mainstream music, the treatment of music within the educational curriculum, and the prevailing societal attitudes toward musical expression among the populace.

Malaysian communities regularly hold music-related events such as cultural festivals, traditional dance performances, and music competitions. These gatherings allow members of the community to showcase their musical talents while also strengthening cultural ties. Educational institutions and cultural organizations in Malaysia actively promote traditional music. Offering courses and workshops, hosting cultural exhibitions, and organizing performances to engage both locals and tourists are all examples of what this entails. The government supports the existence of Malay music through the provision of art facilities as well as ceremonial events and competitions through cooperation with universities, cultural institutions, and cultural entities in Malaysia. This policy is taken by both the federal and royal governments as well as the state governments. These initiatives aim to preserve and promote the rich musical heritage of Malaysia, ensuring that traditional music continues to thrive within the community. Music festivals serve as pivotal avenues for local artists to exhibit their prowess, thereby playing an instrumental role in safeguarding Malaysia's cultural essence and invigorating the nation's musical landscape. Moreover, they serve as catalysts for bolstering the local economy, enticing both domestic and international visitors who inject capital into accommodations, gastronomy, transportation, and sundry goods and services.

As the Malaysian government has no specific policy on how to transmit Malay music in formal institutions (in general), such as schools, the existence of Malay music depends on the activities of community groups with their respective cultures. Conversely, some schools offer special programs on traditional art and music content in the curriculum. Interestingly, the proliferation of popular music in schools has been smoother than Malay music (Shah, 2006). Because access to popular music is greater than access to music classes in schools, most young people grow up knowing only the types of music to which they are regularly exposed. Cultural or similar music activities occur in special events in certain community groups, such as ceremonies or gatherings between ethnic groups, student exchange activities and organizations on campus, art performances, showcases, etc. The Malaysian government often supports cultural arts performances involving traditional Malay music. They offer funding and facilities for performances, festivals, and cultural art exhibitions. However, several educational institutions have provided specialized programs in Malay music for certain purposes. Training and workshops are still organized to ensure the younger generation understands and plays traditional Malay musical instruments

well. This type of program sometimes collaborates with specific music projects, organizations, or cultural practitioners concerned with preserving traditional and Malay music.

The Malaysian government still intends to preserve Malay music and the coexisting cultures in the country. Malaysia has various museums and cultural centers that exhibit traditional Malay musical instruments and information about the history of Malay music. The Malaysian government also strives to protect and preserve Malay musical instruments as part of their cultural heritage. This procedure involves taking measures to safeguard rare and valuable traditional musical instruments. Through festivals, concerts, and art exhibitions (Ahmad, 2010), the Malaysian government promotes Malay culture, including Malay music, domestically and internationally.

Although Malaysia today comprises various ethnicities, such as indigenous, Indonesian, Chinese, and Indian, each retains its own culture and traditions, reflected in its people's musical traditions. The indigenous perception of Ghazal in Malay culture is that it is Indian music (Meddegoda, 2015). Ethnic labeling is still quite visible in social practitioners and people's perceptions (Meddegoda, 2015). This notion confirms that social acceptance and recognition do not correspond to increased public knowledge (Abraham et al., 2002), particularly in the performing arts. The cultural attributes on display in Malaysia, including the music, are still perceived as belonging to the indigenous descendants of certain ethnicities.

The transmission of traditional Malay music serves as a pivotal mechanism in upholding Malaysia's cultural legacy and safeguarding the Malay community's identity. Through entrenched social customs and communal perspectives, the inheritance of traditional Malay music traverses generational bounds, ensuring its perpetuity and resonance within contemporary societal frameworks. Nonetheless, the transmission process encounters formidable hurdles. The onslaught of modernization coupled with the pervasive influence of popular and Western musical paradigms has precipitated a wane in the demand for traditional Malay music. Concurrently, the ubiquitous proliferation of rapidly evolving technological advancements further compounds the predicament. Consequently, proponents of traditional music find themselves dwindling, while erstwhile vibrant musical genres gradually dissipate into oblivion. Remedial initiatives are underway to combat this encroaching quandary. One such endeavor involves the integration of traditional Malay music into contemporary platforms, such as mobile gaming, with the intention of piquing the interest of Malaysian youths (Azman & Kamaruzaman, 2016). This innovative fusion seeks to bridge the intergenerational chasm between today's youth and the age-old tradition of Malay music by rendering it more accessible and engaging.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

As previously stated, the social practices and perceptions of Malay music are heavily based on the multiculturalism principle, which appears to be quite valid. Every ethnic group in Malaysia still has a strong perception of their native music and music from other regions. For example, certain Malay music, such as the Ghazal, is still considered Indian. Indonesian immigrant communities in Malaysia continue to nurture musical practices such as Keroncong, Campur Sari, and Dangdut, demonstrating that ethnic acceptance and labeling are still very strong even in the context of popular music. Traditional music has evolved over time in response to changing human preferences and environmental conditions. Furthermore, efforts are being made to preserve them in a variety of ways, such as documenting, archiving, reviving, and revitalizing past traditions to be associated with the history of identity.

Malaysian society and government must consider other factors that influence the changes and dynamics of Malay music in the context of multiculturalism. After all, the assumption that multiculturalism is a product of "high demand" is still pursued, albeit by examining the various changes in the Malay music scene's social climate and musical practices. All and sundry needs to understand that musical practice is an ongoing process that adapts to the dynamics of technology, evolving music theory knowledge, musicianship skills, and changing musical perceptions. By understanding this, multiculturalism in the Malay musical tradition in Malaysia is perpetuated and moves to a more extrapolated form. The social practices and community perception of Malay music today may change with new paradigms as the music is transmitted from generation to generation.

The Malay and popular music industries in Malaysia still have the potential to expand and enrich Indonesian music practices. Given this level of acceptance for Indonesian musical practices, Malaysia's Malay music scene

will always be a haven for homegrown musicians. Malaysians' enjoyment of Indonesian music, both traditional and popular, is a measure of Indonesian musicians' recognition and musical and aesthetic quality. For cultural collaboration practitioners, this is undoubtedly a bridge that connects projects in Indonesia and Malaysia, where musical practices are still rooted in the same family. As a country traversed and inhabited by the international community, Malay music with a diverse and multicultural theme is the main menu that can be offered to local and foreign tourists.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

We would like to thank the University of Lampung for funding this research, Assoc. Prof. Mohammad Reevany Bustami, Ph.D., the Indonesian student association at Universiti Sain Malaysia, and the informants who assisted in gathering research data.

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