



The Sarawak Museum Journal

Vol. XL No. 61

December 1989



ISSN: 0375-3050

E-ISSN: 3036-0188

Citation: Matusky, P. (1989). Ethnomusicology and The Musical Heritage of Sarawak: Implications for The Future. The Sarawak Museum Journal, XL (61): 131-150

ETHNOMUSICOLOGY AND THE MUSICAL HERITAGE OF SARAWAK: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Patricia Matusky

To speak of music resources in the cultural heritage of Sarawak is to speak of a very rich body of material which has only begun to be systematically documented and studied. One might say it has only begun to be "tapped", tapped in the sense of original documentation and inventory taking, and investigation into the classification of music types and music instruments, description and analyses of musical styles, function of the music and the musicians, and the use of indigenous traditional music in the development of new music styles and in new settings (which may or may not be traditional in nature). As we speak of the musical heritage of Sarawak in the context of the present Symposium, it would seem constructive to examine the possible ways to approach and think about the indigenous musical resources in contemporary Sarawak. These resources are extremely rich and varied owing to the large geographical area and the great number of different ethnic groups involved. Because of the large number of ethnic groups and their variety and distinctness, the music of Sarawak requires long-term, indepth research by scholars highly trained in the field of ethnomusicology. Therefore, this paper will attempt to look at some aspects of the indigenous music of Sarawak using as a framework the field of ethnomusicology. In this way, we may find some clues as to the relevance of old, traditional music in a modern, contemporary society and perhaps even discover new ways to use traditional music in the process of modernization in a developing state.

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In an attempt to accomplish the intentions of this paper, we will look to the methodology and theory found in the discipline called "ethnomusicology". In order to establish a common level of understanding at the outset of this discussion, perhaps it would be fruitful to briefly examine the meaning of "ethnomusicology" — what it is, what it can do for us in the context of this Symposium and, in turn, what ethnomusicology can do for the traditional music of Sarawak.

Although the field of ethnomusicology is now many decades old with a substantial theory and methodology, it is possible to find nearly as many definitions of "ethnomusicology" as there are scholars in the field. One would find, however, some basic agreement as to scope and purpose. It is generally agreed, for instance, that ethnomusicology studies at least three broad categories of music. First, ethnomusicology includes the music of nonliterate societies found throughout the world. These societies are identified as having no system of writing or reading, and in addition they

have (or have had in the past) very little or no contact with neighboring folk or high cultures.¹ We might note, for example, the music of the black peoples of Africa, the Australian aborigines and the American Indians as music of nonliterate societies.

In contrast, the field of ethnomusicology also encompasses the musics of Asian, north African and Middle Eastern high cultures. These cultures and their musics are distinguished by a writing system (for language and music) and usually highly complex musical styles which develop in urban or court environments. Professional musicians perform classical music which usually has a historical base and a written theoretical system. Some examples in this category are the court musics of China, Japan, Korea, India and many genres of music found in the Arabic-speaking countries.

The third and final category of music within the scope of ethnomusicology is known as folk music. Here we find a body of music existing in an oral tradition (that is, the music is not written down) even though a system of writing and reading may be known by the people who perform it. Folk music is often found in those geographical areas of the world which are dominated by or have frequent contact with high cultures. Folk music traditions throughout the world are usually influenced by the musics of the neighbouring high cultures and, in turn, the musics of the high cultures often find stimulus and musical material itself from the folk music traditions. A class of professional musicians may or may not exist in a folk tradition, the learning process is by rote, and a written historical and theoretical base is unknown. As a communal activity, group singing and dancing forms an important channel for socialization in folk music cultures. The existence of a given folk music is based upon agreement and sanctions of the entire community or society and, thus, the music strongly reflects the basic values of the folk culture in which it is found. Finally, folk music in general is very slow to undergo change if compared to other kinds of music.

Based only on the limited research carried out on Sarawak traditional music to date, it would appear that much (if not all) of the music performed by the various indigenous ethnic groups in the State would fit in the folk music category. This conjecture, however, is only tentative and needs further investigation to support or negate the claim. Nevertheless, one clear point is that a study of the traditional music of Sarawak appropriately comes within the scope of the field of ethnomusicology which can provide the necessary theory and methodology to deal with the subject.

Another point on which most ethnomusicologists concur is that equal emphasis be given to the study of the structure of musical sound and to the cultural context in which the musical sound is found. In addition to the music itself, then, the ethnomusicologist must give equal attention to such aspects as the musical instruments, the song texts, the role and status of musicians, the function of music in society, and music as a creative activity of mankind.² As a discipline which requires field work and laboratory analysis by the researcher, and with a broad scope including the music of nonliterate societies, classical oriental cultures and folk music traditions found throughout the world, the field of ethnomusicology has been defined as "... the field which pursues knowledge of the world's music ... from a descriptive and comparative point of view," or alternately as "the study of music *in* and *as* culture"³ (that is, how music is used, performed, composed and thought about in a given culture). Seen as the study of music in its cultural