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## MUSICAL STYLES OF THE BIDAYUH PEOPLE: BUKAR-SADONG GROUP IN THE FIRST DIVISION OF SARAWAK, MALAYSIA<sup>1</sup>

Ng Sie Ai

### ABSTRACT

The objective aims to enlighten readers into the musical styles, instruments and current situation of Bidayuh music within Bukar-Sadong group in Sedan District<sup>2</sup>, First Division of Sarawak. Musical aspects of this group were studied with links to the role and relationship of how music plays a part in Bidayuh culture and society.

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## Music, A Reflection of Culture

A Bidayuh singer said, “*the right way to do something is to sing the right song with it*”. In other words, the Bidayuh people have a song for every activity they do. Music revolves around their lives, ranging from everyday work-songs to those associated with social and religious activities. The Bidayuh are particular about singing appropriate songs for each activity. Most Bidayuh form their philosophy and outlook of life through a lifelong contact with agriculture, nature, supernatural and animals. They sing out the name of everything that crossed their path – birds, animals, plants, rocks – in a sense, singing the world into existence. To the Bidayuh, the songs are the “footprints of the ancestors” or “way of the law,” the core of an intricate connection between everyday life, ancestry and natural surroundings. Music serves as the umbilical cord, tapping into an existence that fuses everyday with the timeless, the ordinary world with the supernatural world.

As rice is the staple diet of the Bidayuh, it is also the crop which gives rise to their most important festival. The rice festival, *Gawai* is celebrated every year to ensure a good harvest. Therefore, the songs and tunes associated with agricultural purposes are often named in references to their mode or situation of presentation. For instance, there is *Agong Gawai Sawa*, music played after harvesting season for merry making and thanksgiving. Then there is *Totonguh Padi* which is played to please the paddy spirit. *Agong Padi* on the other hand, is a song to invoke the spirit to protect the paddy from any harm. *Sayan Aran* is performed when clearing the land before the felling of jungle, and when the clearing of the undergrowth is completed. This ceremony serves as a mean to inform all the spirits in the area to move out so that they will not be harmed by falling trees. *Nyalak* – depicts a ceremony praying to god, *Tapa Riyuh* – to provide sufficient drought to enable the paddy farmers to have their paddy field a good burn. In local terms, the ceremony is known as “*Gawai misuk rakang*” or *Gawai Roba*. *Birantu* dances depict the beginning of collecting the green vegetable tips in the paddy field so that everybody who eats this vegetable will not get sick. Then, there is *Biranyam*, a ritual dance performed to boost paddy seedlings to bear more grains. These examples give us an idea that within a ceremonial festival for instance *Gawai*, the repertoires could add up to a number of songs, ranging from ploughing, planting to harvesting.

For Bidayuh, these ceremonies, rituals and entertainment songs are separated into different groups of songs. There are special songs for warfare (*sirarow*), head-hunting (a tradition that has been abandoned), lullabies (*samuun*), honey-collection (*barih sumpon*), love-epic songs (*brayun*), and so on. Within each category of songs, there are certain songs used to distinguish the different stages, for example, the warfare songs. Epic verses are sung or chanted and a narrative prose is recited to relate the activities of cultural heroes. They recite those activities which include headhunting journey, war journey,



during journey praying for protection and strength, and a song sung to ask for the spirit's forgiveness when an enemy has been captured during hunting.

Other songs are more informal. "Consolation songs," tender solo piece, dispel feelings of sorrow and "encourage one another to do their best" all add to the vocal repertoire. Oddly enough, the tune used for one song can be easily adapted to another. For instance, love-epic songs (*brayun*), and consolation songs often bear the same drone and melody lines that is made up of two or three different notes.

### Social Divisions of Bidayuh Musicians and Singers

From a musical perspective, the social division between men and women were also reflected. Though men and women play distinctly different roles, they possess equal prestige in the eyes of the village and they complement each other by the different chores they performed respectively and their contributions to the whole community. Women had a different role to play and theirs were not to play or even handle musical instruments. Women were respected as "unadulterated"<sup>3</sup> human beings and this forms the basis why they were selected to be *dayung barib*. Apart from the selected few, most of the women in the community possess the ability to sing and dance. For this reason, women are the singers and not musicians. Men, on the other hand, are the musicians. They play all kinds of instruments including a variety of gongs, drums and solo instruments. Moreover, they have the ability to make their own instruments.

In singing, there are two different roles of women singers. One, an ordinary singer while the other holds the position of a priestess. Not all women can become singers or priestesses, except for those whose mothers or foremothers came from an ancestral line of priestesses. The priestess carries out the ritual prayers in their society directed towards *Gawai* festivals.