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An Exploration of Melody, Harmony and Rhythm in Selected Sape Repertoires in Kenyah Ethnic in Sarawak

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Abstract

Sape is a traditional musical instrument from Borneo played by the community of Orang Ulu. Most of the time, *sape* has been used to play as solo, duo and with a group accompanied by other instruments like *jatung lutang*, *kellire*. This research will explore the melody, rhythmic pattern, and harmony in *sape* repertoires in Kenyah ethnicity. Four *sape* repertoires will be analysed: *sape leleng*, *det diet tapung kitan*, *titiet titiek kenai ujan* and *datun julud*, which have unique and different characteristics in musical form.

Keywords: *Sape*, traditional music instrument, Kenyah, *sape* repertoires.

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1.0 Introduction

The *sape* is a traditional musical instrument that is very well known in Kenyah ethnic Sarawak. The Kenyah is an indigenous group dwelling in the mountainous plateau region and the upper reaches of four major rivers of Borneo (Lin, 2013). The Kenyah ethnic are divided into two different areas: Baram and Belaga. Kenyah is a sub-ethnic of Orang Ulu, mostly in Baram (Chong, 2013). Kenyah constitutes one of many minority communities in Sarawak, the largest state of Malaysia (Lin, 2013). According to Chong (2006), The Kenyah dwells in the upper reaches of several rivers in Central Borneo, on both sides of Sarawak and Kalimantan border. The Kenyah has a rich musical heritage and is well known for its musical instrument *sape*, while its music has become one of the chief symbols of Malaysia's rich cultural heritage (Lin, 2014). In the past, the upriver communities of Sarawak lived in relative isolation, cut off from modern urban influences by the sheer difficulties of travel and the lack of access to mass media and mainstream educational facilities (Lin, 2014). These societies are called Orang Ulu, which means people from the Baram, also known as upper river people. The Orang Ulu house, better known by the locals as a longhouse, is one of the most impressive of all the traditionally built homes when it comes to appearance (Gorlinski, 1989).

The Kenyah is found mainly in the highlands, further north of the Centre of Borneo called Baram. As recorded in The Pagan Tribes of Borneo, "Physically they are without question the finest people of the country" (Lin, 2013). Unfortunately, there are few findings on the exact origin of the Kenyah tribe. Their heartland, however, is Long San, along the Baram River. Their culture is very similar to that of the Kayan tribe with whom they live in close association (Lin, 2013). The typical Kenyah village consists of only one longhouse, and the people are mainly farmers planting rice. The weapons of war used by the Orang Ulu, especially the Kayan and Kenyah, are generally the wooden shield, the sword, and the spear. The prized weapons are often decorated with human hair from the rewards of warfare. They accentuate

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the beauty of their weapons with designs which they also lend to designs in tattoo, beadwork, as murals to adorn the house walls, tombs, boats, and paddy barns, woodwork and musical instrument (Matusky, 1997).

1.1 The Sape



Figure 1.1.1: Three strings sape.

This small, isolated community has nurtured refined forms of visual and performing arts, such as the music of the sape, a boat shaped lute which has become a national cultural emblem (Lin 2013). The sape is a traditional lute, sometimes called 'the boat lute' in the West which is carved from a single bole of wood (Lin 2013). The sape strings were made from the sago tree but have now been replaced by nylon strings (Gorlinski, 1988). The most widely known Kenyah instrument is a boat lute known as the sape or *sambe* in Lepo' Tau, who is one of the Kenyah sub ethnics in Baram (Lin, 2013). Sape means to brush lightly with the finger in Lepo' Tau, is a description of the technique so often used by sape players to produce the characteristic ornamentation (the effect between an *acciaccatura* and *appoggiatura*) (Lin, 2013). Most of the techniques in playing the sape are slur and improvisation since it is the traditional music that most people play by heart (Lin, 2006). The sape is a short-necked, plucked boat-lute carved from a single block of wood of which the common choices are *adau*, *merdang* and *merantu* (Gorlinski, 1989). The body is hollow, and the back is left open and originally two-stringed, the normal is now 3-4 strings (Lin, 2013). In the past, strings were made from the fibres of the *iman*, a sugar palm (*arenga pinnata*), now replaced by bicycle brake wire, nylon, fishing lines, steel wire and even guitar strings (Gorlinski, 1989).

The process of making sape is unique from the raw materials used, the process of loose bodies, the motif of loose body, and the scales it uses (Nurbeni, 2012). The technique of playing sape also has its own uniqueness, as there are specific techniques for the right hand and the left hand of a player to produce a good tone while playing the sape (Lin, 2013). At the head of the instrument, the strings are attached to tuning pegs and the position beneath the strings is a series of frets (Lepo' Tau term: *nden*) made of rattan, palm wood or bamboo, glued to the surface with *udep*, type o beeswax (Lin, 2013). The first or lowest string is the melody string. In contrast, the other strings are employed as rudimentary harmony, generally perfect fifth and fourths (Lin, 2013).

The older form of the sape and its repertoires are known variously as *sambe asal*/ *sambe asen*/ *sambe bali dayong* (Lin, 2013). *Asal* and *asen* means original while *sambe bali dayong* strictly refers to the repertoire only, which is connected to the singing spirits featured in the Kenyah traditional belief system (Lin, 2013). Contemporary sape music may be performed solo, in duet or in ensemble, particularly *jatung utang* and *harmonica* and the main purpose is to accompany the dance (Lin, 2013). Sape has been recognised as a tool that is quite difficult to play with in terms of technique and melody improvisation (Matusky 1997). The sape pitch was usually the tonal centre of the destination pitch of cadential melodic motion (Gorlinski, 1989).

2.0 Methodology

The primary sources of this paper are the score transcriptions of the four selected repertoires, specifically from the Kenyah ethnic. The said four repertoires are *Leleng*, *Det Diet Tapung Ulat Kitan*, *Titiek Titiek Kenai Ujan*, and *Datun Julud*. A thorough analysis will be conducted from the transcriptions to analyse the melodic structure, rhythmic pattern and harmony used in these repertoires. All the data will be presented as figures, tables, or pictures. Audio recording is also used to support the analysis process with related articles, books, journals, videos etc.

3.0 The Musical Analysis of Sape Repertoires

As mentioned above, there will be four selected sape repertoires that will be discussed and analysed. These four repertoires are chosen based on their popularity among Kenyah ethnic and well-known to other communities besides Kenyah in Sarawak. These four repertoires

are very highly known in the Sarawak region. They are often performed during any ceremony to accompany dance or a casual performance.

3.1.1 *Leleng*: Melody

Leleng is one of the songs used to accompany dance and is known as a long dance song. Usually, this song will be sung by a soloist, man or woman, but sometimes young children often sing together. The melody of *sape Leleng* is traditionally played in the chorus part. The tuning frets for *sape Leleng* is from the octave lower - do mi fa so la, second octave - do re mi so, and the third octave - do re mi so. As the figure below shows the melody of the *Leleng*. The tuning frets for *sape Leleng* is from the octave lower - do mi fa so la, second octave - do re mi so, and third octave - do re mi so. As the figure below shows the melody of the *Leleng*.



Figure 3.1.1.1: Melody excerpt of *Leleng*

The figure above shows how the melody started with one single note for a pickup melody. The melody begins with a perfect fifth interval in the key of G major. At the same time, it is tuned in a major pentatonic scale. The melody's first section is repeated, ending with the accents in bars 5 and 6. Figure 3.1.1.1 also shows the melody's first and second sections in *sape Leleng*. The first section starts from bar 2 until bar 7, including the repeat sign, and then the second part begins from bar 8 until bar 13, with the repeat sign. The second section starts from the pickup note on bar 7. However, the second section of the melody can be identified as a new motive for the melodic patterns. Moreover, certain bars play the same melody from both sections, bars 4 and 10. The figure below shows the same melody played in the same section.



Figure 3.1.1.3: Melody excerpt *Leleng* bar 4



Figure 3.1.1.4: Melody excerpt *Leleng* bar 10

Figure 3.1.1.3 and figure 3.1.1.4 shows the same melody in bar 4 and bar 10. This melody has the same rhythmic pattern as the non-harmonic tone. Note A on the fourth beat is the passing tone from note G to B. This shows that the melody is used repeatedly but in different lyrics (Jalong, 2007). Usually, when the theme is repeated, the *sape* player improvises in their own playing style but keeps the melodic pattern's original motive. The player will also add more ornamentation, such as grace notes making the melody more colourful.

3.1.2 Leleng: Rhythm



Figure 3.1.2.1: Rhythmic visualisation of *Leleng*

Figure 3.1.2.1 shows the structure of the rhythmic pattern in *sape Leleng*. The grouping of the rhythm is the foundation for constructing the melody. For example, in bar 4, the rhythm is syncopated and ties at the upbeat. There are the same rhythmic patterns in bar 1, bar 3 and bar 5.



Figure 3.1.2.2: Rhythmic visualisation of *Leleng*

Figure 3.1.2.2 shows that there is a rhythm change in bar 8. The new rhythm gives the melody a new mood, whereas the new section is identified. In bars 6 and 7, there are rests on ending the first section and starting a new section.

3.1.3 Leleng: Harmony

According to Connie, Narawi and Saufi, the standard tuning for the 4 strings traditional sape is tuned in perfect 5th. The first and second strings are tuned in the same tune: do. The third and the fourth string are tuned in so. Usually, when the Kenyah community sings the *Leleng* in a cappella, the harmony built with perfect 5th can be heard. Similarly, the sape will also play the perfect 5th to support the melody and give a sense of harmony as a background accompaniment. In the sape *Leleng*, the first string will play the melody. The other strings will play a drone (a note played continuously) to form harmony. It usually will end in perfect cadence resolution of V-I.

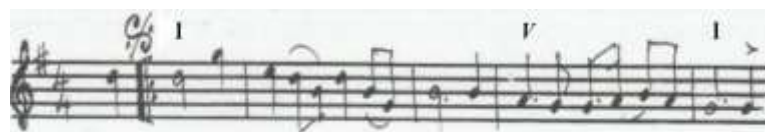


Figure 3.1.3.1: Common harmonic progression of *Leleng* of I-V-I

Figure 3.1.3.1 shows the progression of the harmony in *sape Leleng*. The third and the fourth string will play the low notes to determine the progression. For example, in chord I, the sape player will play the drone techniques followed by the melody. Meanwhile, the third and fourth strings in chord V will be played in perfect 5th apart. This combination of the melody and progression will create a sense of harmony.

3.2 Det Diet Tapung Ulat Kitan: Melody and Harmony



Figure 3.2.1: Melody excerpt of *Det Diet Tapung Ulat Kitan*

3.2 Det Diet Tapung Ulat Kitan: Melody and Harmony



Figure 3.2.1: Melody excerpt of *Det Diet Tapung Ulat Kitan*

Figure 3.2.1 shows the melody transcription of the sape *Det Diet*. In the figure, the first two bars are the pickup melody. This is the same pattern shown in the sape *Leleng* where the repertoire started with a pickup melody. The opening melody is in the higher register, and there are accents in the second bar to emphasise the melody in the introduction phase.

According to Jeffrey, the melody of the sape *Det Diet* is usually played by two sape players playing in two different octaves. The first player will play in octave lower. In contrast, the second player will play in an octave higher with the same melodic and rhythmic patterns. The sape tuning also affects the harmony since the strings 1-2 and 3-4 are in perfect 5th apart. The first string plays the melody while the other strings will play the drone technique. Like sape *Leleng*, the first string is played as a bass to indicate the harmony changes. The typical progression is also similar to sape *Leleng* which is I-V-I.

3.3 *Titiek Titiek Kenai Ujan*: Melody, Rhythm, and Harmony

This repertoire is said to be inspired by the sound of a raindrop (Connie, Narawi, Saufi, 2016).



Figure 3.3.1: Melody excerpt of *Titiek Titiek Kenai Ujan* (bar 1-4).



Figure 3.3.2: Melody excerpt of *Titiek Titiek Kenai Ujan* (bar 9-12).

In figure 3.3.1, the melody in bars 1-4 is in the octave lower, while the melody in bars 9-12 is in the octave higher. The melody is always played with the same motive, even in a different octave. Lin stated that the technique of playing sape is often adding the grace note (appoggiatura and acciaccatura) where the ornamentation and embellishment are applied toward the melody.

Based on the figure above, it can be observed that the rhythmic pattern in the sape repertoire *Titiek Titiek Kenai Ujan* is relatively simple.

However, sape players may add ornamentation in the rhythmic pattern to make it more non-linear and varied. The most common ornamentation is appoggiatura. Improvisation is typical in this repertoire but applies to any sape repertoires. In this repertoire, triads can be clearly seen in the score. The harmonies are built from constructing the chords in the key of F major pentatonic. The chords are built based on the perfect 5th interval using the four open sape strings intonation.

Jeffrey has stated that if two sape players play together, one will play the harmony part. At the same time, the other will introduce the melody. Based on this statement, the harmony is played on the first beat and followed by the melody. Hence, the chords are constructed based on the melody. Finally, the combination of the melody and harmony completes the chord progression, ending with perfect cadence of the V-I progression.

3.4 *Datun Julud*: Melody, Rhythm, and Harmony

Datun Julud is performed by two sape players. The first player will play the melody while the other is playing the harmony part. The song starts with the pickup bar of G-B-C notes and moves in major 3rd at the second bar. This means that the E flat note belongs to the quality of the major pentatonic scale. Like any sape repertoires, grace notes are added between some of the melody notes. Repetition of the melodic pattern is also common in this repertoire, where the exact phrasing will be repeated many times throughout the piece. However, sape players may improvise slightly on these phrasings for colours and variation purposes. The melody is also often played in different

registers. For instance, if the melody is repeated, *sape* players may play the second repeat on different registers, which is common in *sape* performances.



Figure 3.4.1: Melody excerpt of *Datun Julud*

For rhythmic patterns, *Datun Julud* is relatively simple because of its repetitive motives. According to Jeffrey (2007), the rhythm of *Datun Julud* has a very gentle tempo, and it is usually played moderately fast to accompany the long dance. The melody and the rhythm are blended to create the structure of the musical form. Usually, *sape* players will add some rhythmic improvisation, but players must not stray too far from the original rhythmic pattern.

The harmony of *Datun Julud* can be heard when two *sape* players are playing together (duet), where one *sape* player is playing the melody. The other accompanies the melody with a drone line in an ostinato technique (Connie, Narawi, Saufi, 2016). Figure 3.4.1 shows that the second *sape* repeats the harmony with a simple rhythmic pattern while the first *sape* plays the melody. The harmony can be heard when the second *sape* plays the drone on the third and fourth strings. The third and fourth strings are in perfect fifth apart from the first string. The harmonies are formed through the combination of the first and second *sape* played together.

4.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

It can be concluded that most of the *sape* repertoires in Kenyah ethnic in Sarawak use the same technique to produce the melody, rhythm, and harmony. Through the analysis that has been done, we can recognise the similarities of the rhythmic pattern and harmony structure in the *sape* repertoires in Kenyah ethnic. Besides that, the analysis of the *sape* repertoires has shown the differences between the melody structures. It has been demonstrated that the repertoire of the *sape Leleng* and *sape Det Diet* has the same characteristic. Due to its repetitive motives, the melody can be easier to memorise, especially in *sape Leleng*, *Det Diet*, and *Datun Julud*.

Traditional music has no limitations when it comes to live performances. This is because the performers usually improvise using their own interpretations based on the repertoire. However, most older generation *sape* players cannot explain the *sape* music adequately. However, by analysing, we can understand the musical element in these repertoires. From this effort, the new generation of *sape* players will be able to understand and recognise the differences between each *sape* repertoire.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This study is helpful to anyone interested to know or learning about the *sape*. Therefore, this study would explain the differences and similarities between the *sape* music in Kenyah ethnic in terms of melody, rhythmic pattern, and harmonic structure. Moreover, this study will help people to understand the general structure of *sape* music composition, especially music in Kenyah ethnic in Sarawak.

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