

## **Preliminary Exploration of a Semai Musician's Transmission of Indigenous Musical Traditions in Peninsular Malaysia**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article presents the pioneering outcomes of a non-interventive ethnographic observation of a Semai musician's transmission of indigenous musical traditions using selected indigenous musical instruments from his community. The musician, who is primarily a performer, was placed in the role of teacher. Fifteen Semai children from his village between the ages of six and nine were involved. The Semai musician conducted the workshop in his village hut in Tapah, in the state of Perak, over a period of six months. Findings showed that teacher-student mobility, freedom of choice, intuitive responses, integration of cultural concepts, flexibility and adaptability were approaches utilised by this Semai musician in response to the children and particular situations. This paper further posits that teachers need to consider cultural nuances and differences in musical experiences when designing their music curriculum and assessment approaches for music education. Furthermore, this paper argues for versatility and adaptability of the teacher to actively construct and reconstruct his/her teaching approaches by accessing the musical understanding, talents and competencies of children from various cultural backgrounds.

*Keywords:* Indigenous music transmission, multi-cultural music education, Orang Asli, teaching approaches, world music

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### **INTRODUCTION**

This article is based on eight months of research (April 2012 to November 2012) funded by the *Komuniti Inovasi Amanjaya* grant (Research code: 2012-0010-106-16), sponsored by Institut Perak Ridzuan. The investigation examines the musical

transmission of an indigenous musician from the Semai ethnic group of Malaysia. This particular musician, who primarily performed for recreation, leisure and entertainment, assumed the role of teacher for the first time in his career. The research aimed to identify how indigenous music can be transmitted in its most 'original' approaches, capturing the ways in which cultural nuances shape the transmission of indigenous music to indigenous children. In traditional societies, musicians learn to play music through oral tradition that comprises listening, observing and imitating. Research observations on the teaching approaches of exceptional teachers are not new; however, observing the teaching approaches of an indigenous musician who has not been formally trained as a teacher is relatively new. In searching for an alternative approach to pedagogy, we specifically selected a candidate who was not grounded in Western educational concepts and philosophies of teaching utilised in most schools today. We also specifically chose the non-interventive methodology as not to influence or dominate the indigenous musician with our Western-trained music pedagogy as that would have defeated the purpose of the study. We acknowledge that this approach marks an interruption to the indigenous oral tradition of learning, and may be seen as hegemonic or interpreted as patronising, but this research addresses the concerns of the discourse of ethnomusicology in academia over the decline in the transmission of traditional music among the Orang Asli. Therefore, ethnomusicologists are conducting research

on the variety of ways in which traditional music may be transmitted in its most 'original' context to children in national schools or at community-based educational settings. Rather than examine an outsider's teaching of indigenous music in schools, we chose to analyse the teaching approaches of a Semai musician. This research is an initial exploration that addresses the decline in the continuity of traditional musical practices among indigenous communities.

The approach taken in this research may be considered new because the musician, whose name was Alang, was not a trained teacher. Alang transferred his knowledge and skill of performing indigenous music through 'formal' classroom teaching. This research addresses the lack of knowledge of the various ways music may be transmitted and celebrates the multiplicity of musical transmission methods in response to the diverse background of Malaysian children. The focus of this research is on indigenous music taught to indigenous children. The following section describes the background of the Semai, the status of music in their community and in schools attended by the children.

## **BACKGROUND**

The Semai are the largest group of Orang Asli (literally translated as 'original people') or indigenous minorities of Peninsular Malaysia. In 2004, the Orang Asli numbered 149,723 (0.6%) of the national population of 23,953,136 (JHEOA, 2004) and were divided into three main categories based on physical and language affiliations: Negrito,

Senoi or Semang and Aboriginal Malays. The Semai are classified under the Senoi (Seng-oi) group and are a Mongoloid people believed to be descendants of Hoabinhian and Neolithic cultivators who migrated from the north into the Malaysian peninsula around 2000 BC (Nicholas, 2000, pp. 1-4). The Semai language is affiliated with the Mon-Khmer languages of Cambodia and Thailand (Benjamin, 1972). The Semai people are slightly taller with lighter skin and their hair is wavy rather than frizzy in comparison with the Negritos (Skeat & Blagden, 1906; Dentan, 2000, p. 209; Nicholas, 2000, p.2).

Most Semai villages are found along the foothills and mountains of southern Perak and northwest Pahang. Located in the lowland and upland rainforests, the Semai live in an environment surrounded by the Malaysian rainforest with its rich and diverse flora and fauna. Before 2500

B.C., the Semai were believed to have lived near the western coastal areas of central Peninsular Malaysia. Between 2500 B.C. and 1500 B.C, Austronesian immigrants from the islands of Indonesia drove the Semai inland toward the foothills of Malaya's Central or Titiwangsa Range (Bellwood, 1997; Dentan, 2000, 2008). After Malaya's independence from the British in 1957, the Orang Asli were placed under the care of the Department of Orang Asli Affairs (JHEOA), known today as the Department of Orang Asli Development (JAKOA). Due to the nation's aim of achieving developed-country status by 2020, JAKOA focused on 'developing' the Orang Asli through a process of resettlement, assimilation, integration, Islamisation and modernisation. It is hoped that the introduction of modernisation schemes such as introducing modern agricultural methods along with commerce and industry, upgrading



Fig.1: The eighteen Orang Asli subgroups in Peninsula Malaysia (Source: Centre of Orang Asli Concerns).

medical and health services, improving skill development and education opportunities, encouraging entrepreneurship, supporting the sustainability of the arts and culture and eradicating poverty would eventually lead to the construction of an improved livelihood (Nicholas, 2000).

Through the development plans of JAKOA, primary schools were built near Orang Asli villages. At present, Orang Asli children from various villages attend the nearest national primary school in their vicinity and travel further distances to attend secondary school in the nearest town. In national schools, Orang Asli children are moulded by the national curriculum that utilises a standardised syllabus of textbooks, curricula and teaching materials provided by the Ministry of Education. This standardised curriculum provides little flexibility for the diversity of learners from different cultural backgrounds, learning capacities and competencies. A selective syllabus has yet to be developed for those living in rural vicinities that may have a poor command of Bahasa Melayu and the English language but are equipped with living skills encultured from home.

### **OBJECTIVE OF STUDY**

The initial and primary aim of this research was to examine an alternative pedagogy to the formal, Western method of teaching the music of specific cultures in classrooms. Secondary indirect aims included: 1) to empower indigenous agency to construct their own community-based music education programme and; 2) to

sustain and transmit Semai musical heritage among Semai children through the learning and appreciation of indigenous musical instruments and music.

In response to a long history of colonisation, marginalisation and subjugation, the research began as a community project that paved the way towards sustaining Semai instrumental music and singing through formalised education processes conducted by Orang Asli musicians themselves. Community-based education facilitates the recognition of human diversity and distinct socio-cultural identities in the context of a socio-capitalistic environment. Indigenous communities often yield to outside pressure to conform to a dominant educational and cultural ideology, leaving indigenous cultural values to decline and dissipate. Accordingly, “when schools become organic to their local indigenous communities, such communities are able to insist on the insertion of their own values into the school’s organization, management, pedagogy, curriculum, and modes of evaluation” (Corson, 1999, p.3). This research aimed to motivate the Orang Asli to ‘reclaim’ or ‘rediscover’ their musical heritage through oral tradition. It was hoped that through this research the Semai would be able to regain some control over the musical development of their children as part of the educational process impacting their children’s lives. The outcome of the research is the observation of the approaches of an indigenous Semai musician who assumed the role of educator.

## STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Several issues pertaining to the status of the Semai people and the music curriculum in Malaysia's national schools inspired this research. The research addresses: 1) the decline in the transmission of Semai musical heritage during the JAKOA phase of development and modernisation; 2) the lack of multi-cultural music taught in national schools; and 3) issues of transmitting world music in the classroom.

### *Decline of traditional music*

Prior to 1957, the Semai lived in small, nomadic communities. Their music was transmitted from generation to generation through oral tradition. The Semai played instrumental music during the course of their daily lives to accompany work routines. Music and songs accompanied animistic rituals, rites of passage and festive celebrations while Semai children grew up learning and performing the music of their community. Semai traditional songs supported the transmission of traditional cultural values of social responsibility, gender roles and the egalitarian life-style of the Semai peoples (Chan 2012, p.18).

However, in the first decades of the current century, Semai children learned songs sung in church or taught to them in the national schools. Popular songs are regularly heard on radio and television and children listening to them rarely perform Semai music or sing songs from their own cultural heritage. The musical experience of the Orang Asli is increasingly being subsumed by a modern culture of popular

music that is influenced by local and global media. Selected popular music performed by Orang Asli live bands played on CDs or sung in a karaoke style has replaced the indigenous music performed during festivals and rites of passage. Orang Asli youth and children are more interested in Malay and Indonesian popular music than in the indigenous music of their community (Chan, 2012, p.18) because it situates them in the current modern life-style. Many of the song texts of these popular songs revolve around loss of love, consumerism and materialism, and may not necessarily provide positive values to living.

Semai instrumental music and songs are rapidly declining today due to the transformation of Semai lifestyle and livelihood. The documentation of Orang Asli music in audio-visual recordings and writing is sparse and scattered among local and international researchers and institutions. The Malaysian government pay little attention to sustaining Orang Asli music and songs. The Orang Asli are regularly invited by government agencies to perform at tourism-related activities with the aim of constructing an image of a harmonious multi-cultural Malaysia rather than fostering cultural sustainability through traditional music education.

### *Music education in national schools*

The second issue that motivated this research was the lack of multi-cultural music and pedagogical diversity in Malaysia's music education curriculum. The music syllabus in the elementary national curriculum

focuses on teaching Western classical music theories, singing and playing Malay folk songs and music. While some English songs are taught, there is little attempt to teach songs of ethnic groups living in Malaysia or at least songs in the original languages of the Chinese, Indian and indigenous communities of Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak as well as the techniques of playing musical instruments of the various ethnic groups. Music is a compulsory subject in primary schools (ages 7-12) but is an elective subject in lower secondary (ages 13-15) and higher secondary schools (ages 16-17). Primary schools allocate only 30 minutes a week for the arts (Tan, 2008). This category comprises the subjects of music, sports and arts alternating weekly. Some schools undermine the importance of the arts and replace it with supposedly more 'important' activities. The national music curriculum is designed by the Curriculum Development Centre (*Pusat Perkembangan Kurikulum*) and focuses on the teaching and learning of Western classical music theories. Concurrently, common Malay folksongs, patriotic songs and the national anthem are sung in mainly Bahasa Melayu. The music curriculum encourages school personnel to incorporate the teaching and learning methods of the traditional groups in their region. Selecting a traditional ensemble depends on sponsorship and other funding and the availability of traditional music experts in their location (Tan, 2008, pp. 249-252). Some vernacular Chinese primary schools in Malaysia have formed their own traditional ensembles such as the *Hua Yu*

*Tuan* (Chinese Orchestra) and *24 Jie Ling Gu* (24 Festive Drums), along with Chinese traditional dances as part of their extra-curriculum. While multi-culturalism and the *IMalaysia* concept are promoted at national events, implementing multi-cultural music in schools is still practised in its infancy.

This paper posits that culture plays an important role in creative teaching and learning. According to Kim, Triandis, Kagitcibasi, Choi and Yoon (1994), traditional societies are rooted in collectivist culture compared to the individualist culture of industrial and post-industrial societies that emphasise self-discipline, self-sufficiency, personal accountability and autonomy. Cultural variations ranging from belief and value systems, material culture, enculturation systems and education training are derived from different physical and environmental backgrounds of the indigenous communities. Cultural belief systems and lifestyles form strong influences in children's response towards their teachers. Different approaches may be required to nurture the variety of musical competencies among children from differing backgrounds.

#### *Issues in teaching world music*

According to Pecore (2003), music education in the United States before the 1920s centred mainly on formal learning using music methods and approaches by Kodaly, Dalcroze and Orff. In the 1920s, music educators took a keen interest in Intercultural Education and World Music as a tool to promote better cultural understanding between and among the diverse groups



of ethnic and immigrant children in the United States (p. 31). During the 1930s, this interest spurred the teaching of “songs of many lands” (Campbell, 1996) and folk music of various cultures (Volk, 1998) in American schools. In the 1950s, the teaching of world music was dominated by methods of recognition and representation. From the 1960s onward, the importance of teaching music in its cultural context gained serious attention (Pecore, 2003, p. 30). This focus was asserted by Brinner (1995) who wrote that, “musical competence is an integrated complex of skills and knowledge upon which a musician relies in a particular context” (p.1). Shepherd and Wicke (1997) also suggested that “a viable understanding of culture requires an understanding of its articulation through music just as much as a viable understanding of music requires an understanding of its place in culture” (p. 33-34). Many world music classes were taught using transcriptions of fieldwork recordings into western music notation and taught through either the Kodaly, Dalcroze or Orff approaches. During the 1990s, issues of ‘authenticity’ and accuracy in representation were raised in regards to this mode of transmission. To address this issue, culture bearers were invited to join forces with music educators in teaching and producing classroom resource guides for the teaching of World Music (Campbell & Nguyen, 1990; Campbell & Sam, 1991; Campbell & Kuo-Huang, 1992). The debate on whether culture bearers, cultural context, methods of transmission (oral versus visual) or notation systems are

integral to the teaching of world music continues to be assessed and reassessed today. Schippers (2009) states that it is becoming harder for cultures to establish what is authentic; therefore, authenticity in a narrow sense is becoming unsustainable. He suggested that authenticity can be represented as a “continuum, ranging from interpretations tending toward reproduction to emphasis on originality” (p.53). Schippers challenged what he referred to as “stifling directives to recreate ‘authentic’ contexts” in world music pedagogy, arguing that this approach changes the original context. Rather than subject themselves to stringent performing styles, he urged music educators in schools, communities or professional training programmes to “seek with integrity appropriate ways of presenting music” (Schippers, 2009).

In music education research today, cultural diversity in music is taught through different musical approaches and pedagogy. A number of music educators have emphasised the importance of adapting music pedagogy to the various ethnic and cultural backgrounds and competencies of different children. Burnard (2013) stresses the utilisation of appropriate teaching methods in nurturing children’s talents and intelligences. Sheets (2005) suggested that “diversity pedagogy” as a developmental approach to the teaching-learning process can help advance cultural competency in class (Sheet, 2005, xxi). Green (2008) showed how informal learning such as self-motivation, student autonomy as learners and the ability to work independently and

co-operate in groups, can be incorporated in the classroom as an important and alternative pedagogy. Gardner (1983) asserted that the diverse range of intelligences inherent in each child should be nurtured and cultivated. Although Gardner's division of multiple intelligences is criticised for lack of empirical evidence (Waterhouse, 2006) along with the notion that humans have different intelligences, recognising and nurturing areas of strength are crucial in helping shape a child's future. Gardner's theory supports the aim of this paper to delineate the importance of the teacher's understanding of a student's cultural background and innate intelligence with his or her potential.

Various researchers have addressed the debate over whether or not culture bearers are important in the transmission of 'authentic' musical knowledge from respective cultural traditions. Ryan (2013) compared the effectiveness of learning Andean music using Western transmission methods over a transmission process modelled after indigenous Andean musicians. Her findings showed that a student learnt Andean rhythm with more accuracy and ease if the student performed the dance associated with that rhythm simultaneously. Montague (2011) made a comparative observation of the pedagogical approaches and of the teaching values and beliefs of three traditional Ghanaian master musicians living in the United States. Unlike the traditional Ghanaian teaching approach whereby rhythm is taught in its entirety and students were not allowed to ask questions,

the influence of Western teaching techniques such as demonstrating rhythm part by part, critiquing and correcting the students was infused into the musician's pedagogy. However, through some traditional practices such as not allowing students to notate rhythm, singing vocables to rhythm patterns, not having written lesson plans, taking into account ability levels and the importance of participation in musical activities, focus and alertness still remained (pp. 97-100). Kreutzer (1997) showed that children of the Nharira community in rural Zimbabwe were capable of singing as well as the adults by the age of five and a half because music was informally nurtured in a culturally musical environment (pp. 264-266). Kreutzer's research highlights the fact that musical abilities vary according to the enculturation process that each child is exposed to in their early years. What seems impossible for one cultural tradition can be a normal practice in another.

While Ryan (2013), Montague (2011) and Kreutzer (1997) were among those who examined traditional approaches to teaching, one aspect that still needs to be addressed is the different approaches of teaching and learning in different cultural traditions. It has often been taken for granted that traditional music is transmitted through oral tradition and rote learning but there is little research to show the actual processes of how traditional musicians transfer their knowledge to the children of his or her community. How do older musicians disseminate musical knowledge to the young? Do they actually formally instruct, demonstrate and correct?



Do the young acquire musical skills through an enculturation system of rote learning, participation and repetition throughout their early years? While this paper does not address these questions directly, it examines how an indigenous musician adapted his knowledge as a pedagogical tool.

This paper propounds the importance of awareness and understanding of the student's cultural and musical background in optimising classroom learning outcomes. While the educators' training in Western classical music theories and fundamentals of pedagogy is important, adapting pedagogy to enhance learning velocity and capacity is also important. This paper continues below with a brief introduction of the indigenous Semai of Peninsular Malaysia and their traditional form of musical enculturation and current musical acquisition.

## METHODOLOGY

Qualitative and ethnographic research was conducted by utilising a non-interventive observation method between the researchers and the musician Alang for a period of eight months. The research was conducted in a Semai village located in Tapah town, in the state of Perak, Malaysia. The main subjects were Alang and a group of 15 Semai children ranging from ages 6 to 12. The research project created a platform for the indigenous musician to explore and formalise his pedagogical skills in developing the musical potential of the children of his village through teaching the playing of ethnic instruments particular to their community. The instruments taught were the *pensol*

(nose flute), *kereb* (heterochordic bamboo zither) and *centong* (bamboo-stamping tubes).

Several workshop sessions were held in the home of the Semai musician who, for the first time, conducted a series of music lessons for the children in his village. The researchers observed and examined the Semai musician's ways of teaching, including his regular references to the symbolism of musical instruments. The musician introduced the physical structure, hand and finger positions and techniques of playing Semai musical instruments. Simple melodic motives and rhythmic patterns embodying Semai musical structures were presented. The close associations of songs with Semai culture and the environment were evident.

Since a non-interventive approach was adopted, the indigenous musician developed different approaches based on self-evaluation in reviewing methods that appeared more effective. Self-cognition and communication with the community and other indigenous musicians influenced his development. The outcomes of this research were limited to observations by the two researchers over an eight-month period of weekend workshops conducted by the Semai musician. In the following, we outline four approaches to our research observation.

### *Pedagogical Setting*

To maintain proximity to the context in which Semai music was transmitted, the researchers outlined a few fundamental approaches to research including the

pedagogical setting, learning from a familiar face, original learning context and the use of natural acoustics. The pedagogical model for the study was premised on the ideas of familiar space, familiar learning environment and a collaborative approach in indigenous community-based music learning and teaching. Three important approaches were identified in the construction of this model. First, teaching and learning should occur in a naturalistic environment, one approximate and similar to the natural musical acquisition environment of the Semai children. Secondly, utilise an alternative teaching and learning approach to the existing Western pedagogical model used in national schools attended by the Semai children. Thirdly, an indigenous musician should transmit the teaching of music to the Semai children from their own village. It is the intention of this research to revive ways of teaching and learning that encourages intuitive perception and cognition, a method that places the Semai child at the centre of the learning process. Learning through observation, imitation and creative interpretation together represents the essence of musical experience.

**Learning from a familiar face:  
The musician**

An indigenous musician from the same village was selected to teach the children in his village rather than an indigenous musician from another village. This choice was made based on opinions from the Orang Asli themselves. They believed that the children would be less reserved and inhibited

if they were comfortable with the teacher. The Semai children are generally shy and reserved with outsiders. The children chose to attend the music classes based on interest. Each student also selected the instrument he or she was keen on playing.

Alang the musician inherited his musical knowledge from an ancestral lineage passed down from generation to generation. He learnt to play Semai traditional musical instruments and songs through oral tradition and rote learning. Since Alang was self-trained and acquired his musical skills through listening, this indigenous musician ventured into 'unfamiliar territory' by participating in this study that required him to conduct musical workshops for several Semai children. Embodying an Orang Asli heritage of adaptability and versatility, Alang appeared to constantly analyse and (re)construct his teaching approaches at each progressive workshop over a period of six months. Several techniques were observed in Alang's pedagogy. He experimented with issues of space, intuition, flexibility, improvisation and creative strategies in his teaching pedagogy as he assessed the Semai children's response to his teaching. Possessing the indigenous Semai's innate sense of intuition, adaptability and improvisatory skills, Alang constantly adapted his teaching methods to suit the indigenous children's level of development and progress. Through trial and error, he rectified and constructed different ways of transmitting musical knowledge to the children. Observations of Alang's musical pedagogy affirm theories from the field

of evolutionary psychology that problem-solving and adaptation mechanisms are important to the survival of a culture (Buss, 2004; Evans, 2000).

### **Original learning context**

The teaching-learning workshops were conducted in Alang's bamboo hut in his village. This setting provided a space whereby Semai musical heritage could be transmitted within as naturalistic a place and familiar a manner as possible. The bamboo hut was familiar to the children and they were able to enter or leave at will. The approach was based on the philosophy that musically-informed practitioners of that culture might successfully transmit the acquisition of cultural and musical heritage in a naturalistic environment that is conducive, comfortable, friendly and akin to the Semai home environment. Alang invited 15 children for the sessions, as this number was an ideal fit for the size of his bamboo hut. This space allowed interaction, closeness and communication between the teacher and the children. The children were comfortable in a teaching space that shifted according to the needs of the instruments and songs learnt.

### **Natural acoustics**

An important aspect of Alang's bamboo hut was its acoustics. The Semai musical instruments were originally performed in the context of small nomadic settlements in the rainforests of Peninsular Malaysia. These instruments produced soft yet organic, mellow, and soothing sounds that penetrated

across the quiet mountains and forests, the ideal context for the performance of these instruments is a village space in a natural environment. These instruments were not designed for a school hall or stage and therefore not suitable to be performed in those kinds of space. Many Orang Asli performances for tourists are performed in large halls and open air with large audiences. They are amplified for audibility that changes the natural acoustic and aesthetics of the natural organic nature of the instruments. Many modern visitors may find it hard to appreciate Semai music because of its repetitious melismatic motives, perceived as being boring by some. This misperception may be due to the fact that modern visitors are not exposed to the music performed in its original environment or cultural context. If one were to listen to the sounds of these instruments penetrating across the stillness of the village, one could experience the natural organic sounds of bamboo and its spiritual connection with nature and the environment as believed by the Semai.

### *Outcomes of Research*

The research explored the cultural and musical sensitivities of the Semai children and the Semai musician's gradual development of his own musical pedagogy. The research showed that Alang, the musician-cum-teacher, demonstrated versatility, adaptability and intuition in his pedagogy. The outcomes of this research also exemplified the importance of utilising the language and cultural learning systems of the children. The next section illustrates how

the culture of a collective society influences the spatial domain between the teacher and students and the enculturation system of imitation and adaptation embedded in pedagogy and creativity through trial and error.

### Teacher and Student Mobility

The physical and pedagogical space between Alang and the students shifted based on the instruments or songs taught. Unlike common classroom teaching where there is a clear separation between the teacher and student, the space between Alang and his students was less demarcated. There was no central authoritative teacher-space reserved for the teacher. Alang was mobile and adjusted his position to suit the musical instrument he was teaching while taking into account the number of children in attendance. The children were also free to move around Alang if they wanted to get a better view of his teaching tools or the song text he held in his hand. Alang did not reprimand the children if they crossed boundaries of physical space. It is important to note that the cultural background of the children played an important role in Alang's approach. The Semai children are usually obedient, less outspoken and respectful towards their elders. Alang's approach seemed congruent with the Semai children's upbringing.

When Alang taught the *pensol* (nose flute) (Fig.2) the students seated themselves in front of him but more on his right side. This was because they were trying to mirror Alang's demonstration of the side-

blown nose flute. The nose flute he held was extended towards his right. Later, the children shifted their seating position and positioned themselves on Alang's right to watch and imitate his demonstration from a non-mirrored view. This natural intuitive shift may have occurred as the children found it easier to imitate Alang on a non-mirrored view (Fig.3). Alang did not dictate the teaching space and the children accommodated themselves around him based on ease of visibility and comfort. The side-blown nose flute held perpendicular to the nose hole created a linear position among the children. They tried to observe the finger position by watching Alang while he played. However, since this was more a solo instrument, it was difficult for Alang to provide personal attention to each of his students. Therefore, Alang focused on several children who were able to produce good sounds and allowed the others to experiment with ways of producing a good tone. The nose flute produces a soft tone and individual children experimented on producing a sound from the *pensol*.

When the *centong* (bamboo stamping tubes) was taught, the children formed a semi-rectangular position (Fig.4). During this workshop, Alang utilised only two woodblocks that accommodated two pairs of bamboo stampers on one block. The length of the woodblocks was flexible. This was due to the fact that the pairs of *centong* were stamped on two different blocks of wood. The length of the two woodblocks allowed each to be placed perpendicular to each other. This space between the teacher





Fig.2: Children seated opposite and learning to mirror Alang's fingering position.



Fig.3: The children shifted to sit on Alang's right to observe him teaching from the corner of their eyes



Fig.4: Children seated in a semi-rectangular formation while Alang is seated opposite them

and children was a negotiated place, with the children having the freedom to adjust and position themselves according to the musical instrument for convenience and efficacy. Alang guided the singing and musical skill of performing the *jenulak* song in front of the children. Since he was mobile, Alang sometimes guided their hand movements from behind (Fig.5).

Many of the children were attracted to strumming the *kereb*. One of the reasons for the popularity of the *kereb* is that popular songs comprising a melodic line accompanied by chordal progressions could easily be produced on the *kereb*. The children held on to the *kereb* and began to sing and strum in rhythm to songs they enjoyed such as 'Budak Kampung' (Village Boy). They strummed in rhythm to their singing and it did not matter whether they were strumming the right chords as their enthusiasm to play an instrument overruled the need to be 'in-tune'. In learning the *kereb*, the children automatically positioned themselves on Alang's right, sitting parallel or behind him. This provided them with a better sense of strumming and plucking patterns. Alang taught the children to strum to the *jenulak* song, 'Sangkut dipulai yang debor', the same song he used to teach the *centong*. Utilising the same song for different instruments showed that Alang's intuition when teaching was based on ingraining the familiar.

The teaching space and less authoritative approach used by Alang allowed a process of self-elimination or participation based on interest. We observed that only specific

children maintained their attention and interest on the *pensol*. Only a few children were persistent enough to keep experimenting with their breathing to achieve a smooth tone on the *pensol*. Alang focused on teaching the first few children who were able to produce a steady and good tone on the *pensol* and allowed the others to self-experiment. Other children were also more attached to the *kereb* while some showed better skills in mastering the rhythmic stamping of the *centong* (Fig.6). Some children became restless and wandered outside to play. One may see this as a natural elimination or selection of potential *pensol* players based on interest, determination and persistence. This phenomenon is one of the significant observations of this research. It suggests that children should be encouraged to continue learning an instrument not by force but by self-directed interest. Children should be nurtured to pursue something they enjoy learning. A similar situation was observed during the teaching of the *kereb*. Since Alang focused on only some children, the others began to form their own groups and strummed the *kereb* to their own song repeatedly (Fig.7).

#### **Embracing music across cultures.**

To play the *pensol*, one has to master: 1) breathing techniques; 2) harmonics; and 3) ornamented passages. Most of the music repertoire for the *pensol* utilises harmonics and are highly ornamented with turns. Alang had learnt these songs by rote and there was no documented sequential approach to learning the *pensol*. When Alang began teaching one of the Semai *pensol* songs to





Fig.5: Alang guiding the child in stamping a rhythm pattern



Fig.6: Children seated parallel and behind Alang while learning the kereb (plucked bamboo zither).



Fig.7: Children trying to improvise their own song on the kereb.

the beginners, he began to realise that it was far beyond their level even as beginners. Therefore, he quickly chose a song that was familiar to the children to teach the four basic tones of the *pensol*. Interestingly, the song Alang chose was *Wau Bulan* (*wau*: type of kite; *bulan*: moon), one of the most popular Malay folk songs learnt and sung by Malaysian children in national primary schools. This intuitive reaction showed that the indigenous musician was adept at

making independent decisions in response to the current situation, and was not fixated on references from books nor theories. Growing up in a multi-cultural environment, Malaysians are subconsciously exposed to folksongs from various ethnic groups, especially the Malay ethnic group. These songs have become embedded in the Malaysian sub-consciousness. Music and songs across cultures are shared, while some music and songs may be politically

charged, they may also be aesthetically pleasing or catchy enough to override its political content.

**Culture in pedagogy.** One of the most important objectives of this research was to sustain Semai cultural heritage through their music. In his pedagogy, Alang utilised many Semai words to instruct the children. These words are windows into the value system of the Semai. Alang utilised terms such as *nanek na ne* (one, two, three) to queue the entry into the music. He often asked the children to *cerngai* (listen) and *neng* (see). For the learning process, Alang asked the children to *kerlos* (repeat), *cok beh* (try to play it), *beh nej* (play the song) and *kennem-kennem* (play together). He praised the children using the word *gabor* (good). The instruction of *cerngai* points to the importance of listening carefully before imitating, an important Semai musical pedagogy that stems from their cultural practices. *Neng* stresses the importance of watching and observing before doing, as a practical yet meticulous way of learning passed on from generation to generation. The skills of making bamboo houses, hunting with a blowpipe, killing a wild boar or chopping down trees were transmitted from father to children through observation and experience. Alang emphasised these skills in his musical pedagogy. The constant instruction to *kerlos* (repeat) and *cok beh* (try to play it) indicated that mastering a skill requires trial and error, acute observation and repetition. In their traditional subsistence livelihood, children sharpen their living skills by continuously repeating the act.

Every Semai child has to learn survival skills such as hunting and fishing in order to survive with others as a community. Therefore, pampering or spoiling a child does not benefit the child nor the community. Alang's musical transmission encouraged and nurtured the innate qualities of a human being through his or her five senses.

**Mnemonic sounds from natural resources.** Alang began by introducing the names of the longer and shorter bamboo stampers. The longer bamboo stamper was called *jantan* (male) and the shorter called *betina* (female). Alang created his own mnemonic sounds to accompany the stamping of the *centong*. These sounds were *dung* for *jantan* and *deng* for *betina*. He indicated that the *jantan* should be stamped first for the 'Sangkut dipulai yang debor' song. The *jantan* was commonly held with the right hand, while the *betina*, with the left. Alang said,

*Ada beberapa teknik, cara dia, dan yang jantan, cara dia, pegang dia, separuh orang, yang jantan pegang kiri. Yang penting ialah bunyi dia.*

(There are many techniques and ways of holding the centong, some people hold the jantan in the left hand, but more importantly, the sound must be right.)

Similar to the *centong* is the *kereb*, a bamboo plucked zither that has two strings. The longer string is called *jantan* and the shorter string is called *betina*. Alang began by plucking the *jantan* string, which he

referred to constantly the string closest to the musician's heart as the longer string, the string on top (*atas*) or the string closest to the musicians chest. Using the mnemonic sounds *dung* (*jantan*) and *deng* (*betina*), Alang instructed the student to pluck the 'top' string or the *jantan*. The *kereb* is held perpendicular and across the musician's chest from waist to shoulder. The calling out of musical instruments during practice using cultural metaphors assists in the sustainability of belief systems associated with the culture.

**Creative symbolic notation.** Most *jenulak* songs are sung to *centong*

accompaniment. The challenging part of performing *jenulak* songs is to sing while simultaneously stamping the *centong* in rhythm. As some children had difficulty stamping the correct rhythm, Alang created his own visual notation system for the stamping patterns to a familiar Semai *jenulak* song titled 'Sangkut dipulai yang debor'. He admitted that he did not know how to write the 'speed' (or rhythm in Western musical terms) for the *centong*. The visual notation was divided into two sections: *kentop* (right) and *kenvil* (left). *Kentop* was marked with the number 1 and *kenvil* with the number 2. There were

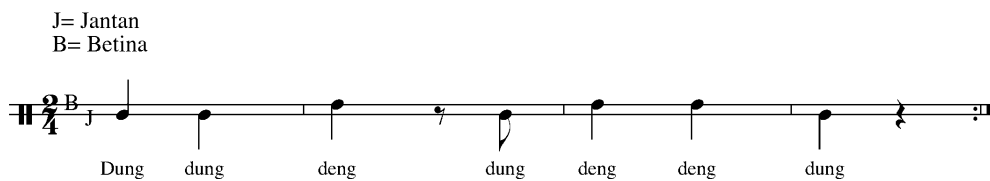


Fig.8: Centong accompaniment to the 'Sangkut dipulai yang debor' song (notated by researchers for the purpose of explaining Alang's visual notation).

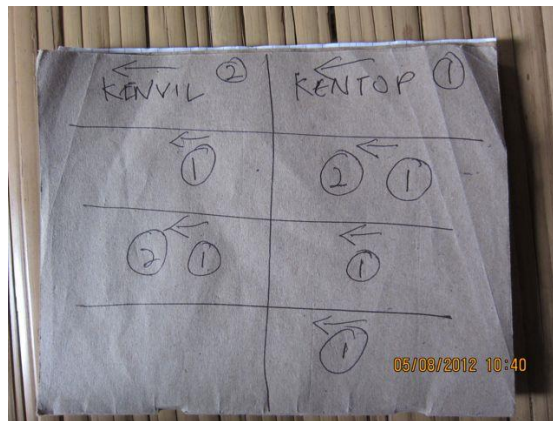


Fig.9: Alang's visual rhythm pattern guide.

**Guide:**  
*Kentop* = Right  
*Kenvil* = Left

a number of discrepancies as to how the notation was written in relation to how it should sound. Basically, a player needed to stamp twice on the *kentop* or right bamboo stamper (1) once at a longer duration on the *kenvil* or left bamboo stamper (2). The shorter duration is likely to be two quaver values, while the longer duration is a crochet value. He then stamped again on the *kentop* for a longer duration and twice on the *kenvil* for a shorter duration. This notation does not indicate the rhythm of the notes. A comparison of Fig.7 and Fig.8 shows this discrepancy. In Fig.7, we utilised Western classical music notation to illustrate the rhythm that Alang attempted to teach in his diagram, Fig.8. Trial and error are part of the process of mastering this particular pedagogy. Problem-solving through experimentation and creation embodies the nature of Orang Asli communities that adapted their livelihood and survival to the changing environment and social surroundings.

## CONCLUSION

This research manifests the importance of taking cultural nuances into consideration, appreciating and being adept to learning through diverse methods. The teacher's flexibility is important in the process of nurturing those who possess different musical competencies and addresses the diverse background of children around the world, specifically that of indigenous children as it is based on intuition and versatility.

During the research period, the Semai children went through individual learning experiences aimed toward personal mastery of a musical instrument. They also experienced group instruction through collaborative learning and group learning. The workshops promoted the sustainability of the Semai cultural heritage by reviving traditional music and songs, hence keeping oral tradition alive. While the musician experimented with teaching, he also explored and developed a simple repertoire to facilitate the teaching and learning process. The process of developing a new repertoire by the indigenous musician led to the composition and performance of a combination of new and old pieces of music. Making music as an act of social cohesiveness and solidarity through creative cultural transmission and affirming (Semai) cultural aesthetics, worldviews and wisdom through the children was achieved in this research.

This paper discussed the preliminary stages in the development of an indigenous community-based musical pedagogy. The discussion explored the areas of individual instruction by observing how an indigenous musician explored his pedagogical potential. The outcome of this pioneering research revealed an alternative approach to musical transmission that could be used as a reference for potential research and paves the way for future research. These outcomes affirm the importance of culture and enculturation systems in the construction of musical pedagogy. Furthermore, the outcomes exemplify the importance of utilising the

local language along with cultural learning systems in musical pedagogy. Awareness of the diversity in pedagogy to accommodate different musical competencies and cultural systems is a responsibility that needs to be cultivated among teachers. This paper shows that culture and context play an important role in nurturing and developing the musical abilities of the indigenous Semai children in their own musical tradition.

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