



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Rhythms of Identity: A Comparative Study of Bertitik and Mongigol-Sumundai Music in Bajau Samah and Rungus Communities on Sabah's Northwest Coast, Malaysia

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>Received: Aug 19, 2024</p> <p>Accepted: Oct 4, 2024</p> <p>Keywords</p> <p>Bertitik Ensemble Mongigol-Sumundai Ensemble Bajau Samah Rungus Cultural Identity</p> <p>*Corresponding Author: mohd@upsi.edu.my</p>	<p>This study explores the shared musical and cultural elements of the Bertitik and Mongigol-Sumundai ensembles, focusing on their instrumental use and rhythmic structures. The primary objectives are to analyze the musical elements based on the theory of norms of musical style and to conduct a comparative analysis between the Bertitik ensemble of the Bajau Samah and the Mongigol-Sumundai ensemble of the Rungus tribe. Employing an ethnographic approach, the research integrates document analysis, observations, and interviews during fieldwork, structured in three phases: Phase I includes fieldwork with recordings and documentation of the musical repertoire; Phase II involves laboratory work, particularly transcribing music using Sibelius software; and Phase III comprises a comparative musicological analysis of both ensembles. Fieldwork took place in Kulumbai Village in Kota Belud and Matunggong Village in Kudat, Sabah. Key findings indicate significant rhythmic similarities, especially the concept of <i>l'istesso tempo</i>, which sustains a consistent tempo across various sections. Additionally, the study highlights the influence of gender roles on performance practices within the Bertitik ensemble. By applying the concept of bi-musicality, the research captures the unique musical identities of both ensembles, illustrating how music reflects cultural identity and reinforces social norms in Sabah's diverse context. Ultimately, the findings emphasize the role of music as a crucial expression of cultural identity and social cohesion, promoting further investigation into the relationship between music and cultural practices in multi-ethnic settings.</p>

INTRODUCTION

Sabah is renowned for its breathtaking natural beauty and rich ethnic diversity. The Kadazandusun community is the largest ethnic group in the state, followed by the Bajau community (Halina Sendera Mohd. Yakin & Saidatul Nornis Mahali, 2008). Bajau settlements in Sabah can be found in districts such as Kota Belud, Tuaran, Kudat, Papar, as well as the Darvel Bay area in Lahad Datu and Semporna (Saidatul Nornis Mahali, 2015). According to Mark (2011), the Bajau Samah are divided into two groups: The West Coast Bajau and the East Coast Bajau. The West Coast Bajau, also known as the Bajau Samah, are skilled rice farmers and reside along Sabah's western and northern coasts. In contrast, the East Coast Bajau, or Sea Bajau, lead a sea-oriented lifestyle, particularly in areas like Semporna.

The Bajau Samah community has its own traditional attire, dance, and music, which are especially prominent during cultural and social events. The Bertitik ensemble, recognized as the most famous musical ensemble in Sabah, is performed at weddings and other social occasions (National Department for Culture and Arts, Sabah). Instruments in this ensemble include drums (gendang), knobbed-gongs, bebandils (small gongs), and kulintangan (gong-chime). All instruments are essential, as the absence of any one would render the ensemble incomplete and out of tune. The Bertitik ensemble also serves as an auditory signal to inform the community of ongoing celebrations.

Meanwhile, the Rungus tribe, another ethnic group in Sabah, is primarily located in the northern part of the state (Chonnel George and Mohd Hassan, 2021). As noted by Raymond Majumah (2015), the Rungus people live in areas such as Kudat, Matunggong, Kota Marudu, Pitas, Pulau Banggi, and parts of Sandakan in East Malaysia. A sub-group of the Kadazan-Dusun, the Rungus have their own language, dialects, culture, customs, and traditional attire. According to Ronald Yusri Batahong, Jedol Dayou, and Losuyun Juhilin Takun (2016), the Mongigol-Sumundai traditional dance of the Rungus is accompanied by a specific music ensemble, which includes seven gongs: koritikon, pompo (agung and soludon), sandangau, and three tied gongs called tavag (hungkodonon, bimbingon, tongikon).

These two tribal groups live in close proximity to one another, each with its own native language for communication within their communities. However, both use Bahasa Melayu, the official language of Malaysia, when interacting outside their groups. A key distinction between them is their religious practices: the majority of the Bajau Samah community are Muslims and follow a culture closely aligned with Islam, while the Rungus community predominantly practices Christianity alongside the customs and traditions passed down from their ancestors. Despite these differences in religion and customs, both tribes coexist peacefully and maintain positive interactions. The Map 1 below illustrates the geographical distribution of Bajau Samah and Rungus settlements.



Map 1: Bajau Samah and Rungus settlements in Borneo

2. Problem Statement

The ethnic diversity in Sabah, particularly among the Bajau Samah and Rungus communities, highlights the complex relationship between cultural identity, language, and religion. Although these groups live near one another and use Bahasa Melayu for external communication, they maintain distinct cultural practices and languages within their communities. A key difference is their religious beliefs, with the Bajau Samah primarily practicing Islam and the Rungus adhering to Christianity. This dynamic raises important questions about how these communities preserve their unique identities, interact with each other, and maintain social harmony in the face of modernization and external influences.

The musical traditions of both communities play a crucial role in expressing their cultural identities and are central to their social and ceremonial events. The *Bertitik* ensemble of the Bajau Samah, featuring gongs, drums, and the *kulintangan*, and the Rungus' *Mongigol-Sumundai* ensemble, marked by a unique set of gongs, are both vital to their respective communities. However, as these groups increasingly interact with each other and the broader society, understanding how these traditional musical practices are preserved, adapted, and passed down becomes essential. The influence of modernization and cross-cultural interaction on these musical traditions remains an area that requires further study, particularly regarding how these changes impact cultural continuity.

Additionally, exploring the role of these musical traditions in fostering social cohesion or emphasizing cultural distinctions is crucial, especially considering the religious differences between the two groups. Despite their differing beliefs, both the Bajau Samah and Rungus have coexisted peacefully, and their music serves as a key aspect of this harmony. A comparative analysis of their musical practices can provide deeper insights into how they maintain cultural resilience, adapt to external influences, and potentially use music as a platform for intercultural dialogue in multi-ethnic Sabah.

3. Objectives

Based on the demographic elements of these two minority tribes who settled in adjacent geographical areas, this research aims to;

1. Analyse the elements of the music of *Bertitik* and *Mongigol-Sumundai* ensembles based on the theory of "norms of musical style".
2. Conduct a comparative analysis of musical elements between the *Bertitik* of Bajau Samah and the *Mongigol-Sumudai* of the Rungus tribe.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study utilized an ethnographic approach, incorporating document analysis, observations, and interviews conducted during fieldwork. The primary objective was to examine the musical norms of the *Bertitik* ensemble of the Bajau Samah and the *Mongigol-Sumundai* ensemble of the Rungus tribe. The research framework followed a three-phase structure:

- i. Phase I: Fieldwork, including recordings and documentation of the musical repertoire.
- ii. Phase II: Laboratory work, which involved transcribing the music notation (using Sibelius software), analyzing the music, and preparing the finalized documentation.
- iii. Phase III: A comparative musicological analysis of both musical ensembles.

The musicological and comparative analysis was based on fieldwork conducted in two locations: Kulambai Village in Kota Belud and Matunggong Village in Kudat, Sabah, approximately 25 kilometers apart. Recordings were made in two settings for each ensemble—first, during live social events, and later in pre-arranged performances for recording purposes. The *Bertitik* ensemble was recorded during a wedding ceremony and then in a staged performance two days later with the same musicians. Similarly, the *Mongigol-Sumundai* ensemble was recorded during a wedding ceremony in Matunggong Village, followed by a pre-arranged performance two weeks after the event with the same group of musicians.

5. RESULT

To carry out a comparative analysis of the *Bertitik* and *Mongigol-Sumundai* musical ensembles, the theory of "Norm of Musical Style" proposed by Mantle Hood (1971) was applied. Several key musical elements were emphasized in this section, including the instruments used, modes, scales, rhythms, and melodies.

i). Musical Instruments

Table 1 below presents a comparative list of musical instruments used in both ensembles, performed by two different tribes located in close proximity within the state of Sabah.

Table 1: Comparative of Musical Instruments

List	<i>Bertitik</i> ensemble(Bajau Samah Tribe)	<i>Mongigol-Sumundai</i> ensemble(Rungus tribe)
Name of Musical Instruments	Kulintangan	Sandangau
	Bandil 1	Koritikon
	Bandil 2	Soludon om pompo
	Gendang 1	Tontog
	Gendang 2	Tavag (3 knobbed gong tied together)
	Gong 1	
	Gong 2	
Number of Music Player	Seven	Five
Melodic Instrument	Kulintangan	Sandangau
Head Music Ensemble	Kulintangan	Koritikon

The comparative analysis of the musical instruments used in the *Bertitik* ensemble of the Bajau Samah tribe and the *Mongigol-Sumundai* ensemble of the Rungus tribe reveals both similarities and differences in their structure and performance styles.

In the *Bertitik* ensemble, the *kulintangan* (a gong-chime instrument) plays a central role as the melodic instrument and head of the ensemble. It is accompanied by two *bandils* (small gongs) and two drums (*gendang*), with the addition of two larger gongs, making it a seven-player ensemble. In contrast, the *Mongigol-Sumundai* ensemble has fewer players, with only five musicians. The primary melodic instrument is the *sandangau*, and the head of the ensemble is the *koritikon*, another type of gong. The Rungus ensemble also uses distinctive instruments like the *tontog* (drum), *soludon om pompo* (gongs), and the *tavag*, a unique set of three knobbed gongs tied together.

While both ensembles feature gongs and drums as core elements, the specific instruments and their configurations differ, reflecting each tribe's cultural and musical identity. The *Bertitik* ensemble appears more elaborate with a larger number of instruments and players, while the *Mongigol-Sumundai* ensemble is smaller and uses fewer instruments with different configurations of gongs and drums.

ii). Role of Musical Instruments

Table 2: Role of Musical Instruments

Role	<i>Bertitik</i>	<i>Mongigol-Sumundai</i>
Melody	Kulintangan	Tavag
Head Music Ensemble	Gendang	Koritikon
Beat-keeper/Tempo	Gendang	Sandangau
Accompaniment	Gong 1 and 2	Soludon om pompo
	Bandil 1 and 2	Tontog

Table 2 presents a comparative analysis of the roles of musical instruments in the *Bertitik* ensemble of the Bajau Samah and the *Mongigol-Sumundai* ensemble of the Rungus tribe. Each ensemble employs distinct instruments that fulfill specific functions within their musical frameworks, reflecting their cultural practices and musical styles. In the *Bertitik* ensemble, the *kulintangan* serves as the primary melodic instrument, while the *gendang* (drums) act as the head of the music ensemble and also play a vital role in maintaining

the beat and tempo. The ensemble's harmonic foundation is provided by two gongs and two *bandils*, which accompany the melody. In contrast, the *Mongigol-Sumundai* ensemble features the *tavag* as its main melodic instrument, with the *koritikon* taking the lead role in the music ensemble. The *sandangau* serves as the beat-keeper, ensuring the rhythm is upheld throughout the performance, while the *soludon om pompo* and *tontog* provide accompaniment, enriching the overall sound.

This comparative analysis underscores the different instrumental arrangements and roles within each ensemble, illustrating how each group’s musical practices align with their cultural expressions. The specific instruments used in both ensembles highlight the unique aspects of Bajau Samah and Rungus musical traditions, revealing how they structure their music to reflect their identities and communal values.

iii). Musician

Table 3: The Roles of Musicians

Bertitik	Played by	<i>Mongigol-Sumundai</i>	Played by
Kulintangan	Woman	Koritikon	Men / women
Bandil 1 and 2	Women	Sandangau	Men / women
Gendang 1 and 2	Men	Soludon om pompo	Men / women
Gong 1 and 2	Men	Tontog	Men / women
		Tavag	Men / women

Table 3 provides a comparative analysis of the roles of musicians within the *Bertitik* ensemble of the Bajau Samah and the *Mongigol-Sumundai* ensemble of the Rungus tribe, highlighting the gender distribution among performers. In the *Bertitik* ensemble, the *kulintangan* and *bandils* are predominantly played by women, reflecting the cultural significance of female participation in this musical tradition. In contrast, the *gendang* (drums) and gongs are primarily performed by men, showcasing a gender division in instrumental roles. This distribution emphasizes the cultural norms and expectations surrounding gender in the Bajau Samah community.

Conversely, the *Mongigol-Sumundai* ensemble exhibits a more inclusive approach to gender roles, with both men and women participating in playing instruments such as the *koritikon*, *sandangau*, *soludon om pompo*, *tontog*, and *tavag*. This diversity in participation suggests a more egalitarian structure within the Rungus musical tradition, allowing for broader involvement in their cultural expressions. This comparative analysis highlights how gender dynamics shape the performance practices and communal identity of each group, reflecting their distinct cultural values and social structures.

iv). Analysis of Music

a.) Scales

The scales utilized in the *Bertitik* ensemble apply specifically to the *kulintangan*, which is the central instrument of the music group. Analysis indicates that the *kulintangan* is played using a pentatonic scale in C Major, consisting of five musical notes: C, D, E, G, and A. The other instruments serve primarily as accompaniment (see Music Notation 1: *Kulintangan*). In contrast, scales are not applicable to the *Mongigol-Sumundai* ensemble, where the emphasis is placed on rhythmic uniformity and the harmonization of sounds produced. According to Chonnell G. and Mohd Hassan (2021), two terms are used to evaluate *Mongigol-Sumundai* performances: *enumpak* and *ongontod*. *Enumpak* refers to the uniformity of rhythmic patterns

and the compatibility among musicians, while *ongontod* pertains to the harmonization of the sounds generated as show in Music Notation 5: *Koritikon*.



Music Notation 1: Kulitangan

Transcription of Mongigol-Sumundai music, featuring the Koritikon instrument.

Music Notation 2: Koritikon

b) Mood

The observations conducted reveal that both the *Bertitik* and *Mongigol-Sumundai* music ensembles share a common musical mood characterized by joyfulness. This joyful mood is not only a reflection of the inherent musical qualities of each ensemble but also serves to enhance the cultural and social contexts in which the music is performed. In the case of the *Bertitik* ensemble, the lively rhythms and melodic structures contribute to an atmosphere of celebration, often associated with significant life events such as weddings and communal gatherings. The upbeat nature of the music encourages participation and fosters a sense of community among performers and listeners alike.

Similarly, the *Mongigol-Sumundai* ensemble evokes a joyful ambiance, which is particularly evident during traditional dances and cultural festivities. The energetic rhythms and harmonious sound produced by the gongs and other instruments create an uplifting experience that resonates with both the performers and the audience. This shared joyful mood not only highlights the cultural significance of these musical traditions but also reinforces social bonds within the communities, as music becomes a vehicle for collective expression and celebration.

Moreover, the alignment in musical mood between the two ensembles suggests deeper cultural connections and shared values among the Bajau Samah and Rungus communities. As both groups navigate their unique identities, the joyfulness of their music serves as a unifying element, fostering a sense of harmony despite their distinct cultural practices. This commonality emphasizes the power of music to transcend cultural differences, allowing for a rich tapestry of shared experiences and communal joy in the vibrant cultural landscape of Sabah.

c) Rhythm

The musical analysis reveals that both the *Bertitik* and *Mongigol-Sumundai* ensembles are structured in a 4/4-time signature, which is a common rhythmic framework in various musical traditions. The *Bertitik* ensemble maintains an average tempo of 78 beats per minute (bpm), while the *Mongigol-Sumundai* ensemble has a slightly slower tempo of 76 bpm. This close tempo range reflects the rhythmic similarities between the two musical styles, contributing to their shared cultural roots.

Furthermore, metric modulations significantly influence the rhythmic patterns in both ensembles, particularly with the incorporation of triplet semi-quavers, referred to as *l'istesso tempo* in musical terminology. This concept allows for a seamless transition between different rhythmic feels while maintaining a consistent tempo. The red boxes highlighted in Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the instances of *l'istesso tempo* within each ensemble, showcasing how both traditions utilize this rhythmic device to create complex and engaging musical phrases. The use of *l'istesso tempo* not only enhances the overall rhythmic texture but also serves as a point of connection between the two ensembles, demonstrating the interplay between cultural expression and musical form in the *Bertitik* and *Mongigol-Sumundai* performances.

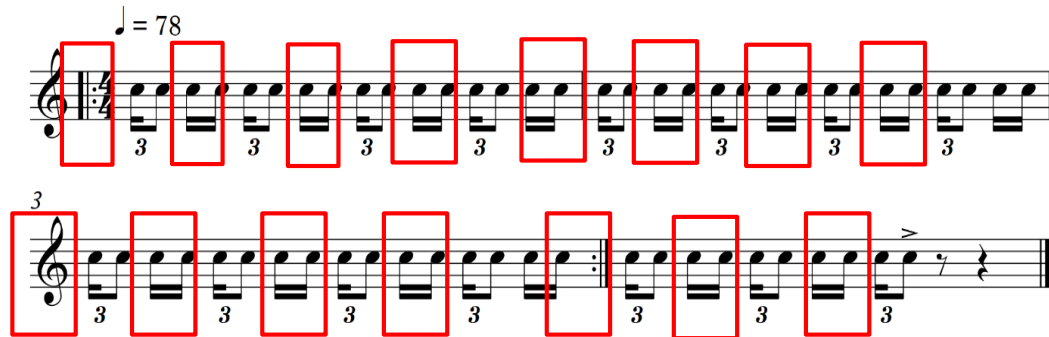


Figure 1: Music notation for gong in *Bertitik* music ensemble

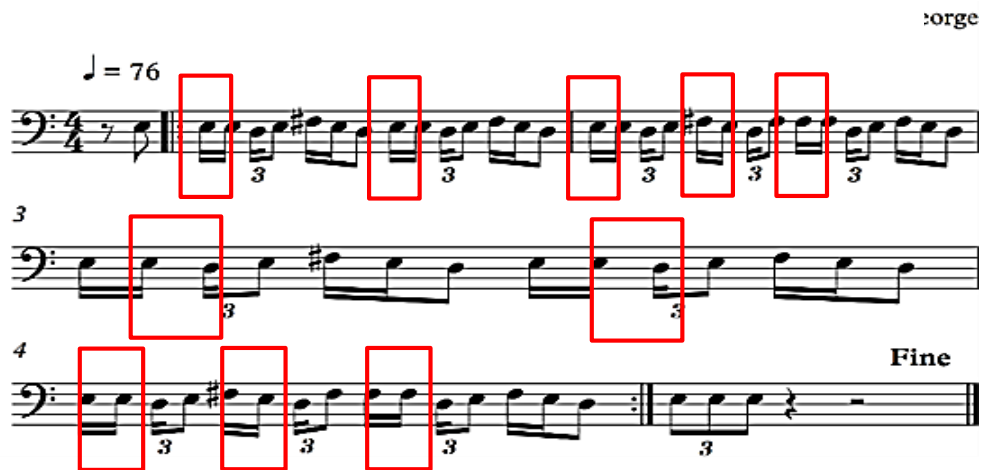


Figure 2: Music notation for *tavag (mongolimbambang)* in *Mongigol-Sumundai* music ensemble

d) Melody

In the *Bertitik* music ensemble, the presence of conjunct and disjunct notes plays a significant role in shaping the melodic structure and expressive qualities of the music. As illustrated in Figure 3, the boxes highlight conjunct notes, which are characterized by their stepwise movement, creating a smooth and connected melodic line. These ascending and descending patterns contribute to the overall fluidity of the musical expression. Conversely, the circles emphasize the disjunct melodic motions, which involve larger leaps

between notes. This contrast between conjunct and disjunct movement enriches the musical texture and adds depth to the performance.



Figure 3: Music notation for *Kulintang* in *Bertitik* music ensemble

Figure 4 presents the *tavag*, a unique instrument comprising three knobbed gongs tied together, which is indicative of the ensemble's distinctive sound. The notation for the *tavag* reveals only three musical notes, reflecting the specific pitches identified during laboratory analysis. However, it is important to note that there are no standardized notes for the *tavag*, as its tuning is highly dependent on the player's listening skills and the desired sound. This aspect highlights the necessity for an experienced musician to interpret and convey the "precisely desired sound," emphasizing the instrumentalist's role in shaping the musical outcome. The flexibility in tuning and the reliance on the musician's expertise showcase the dynamic nature of *Bertitik* music, allowing for individual expression while maintaining a cohesive ensemble sound.

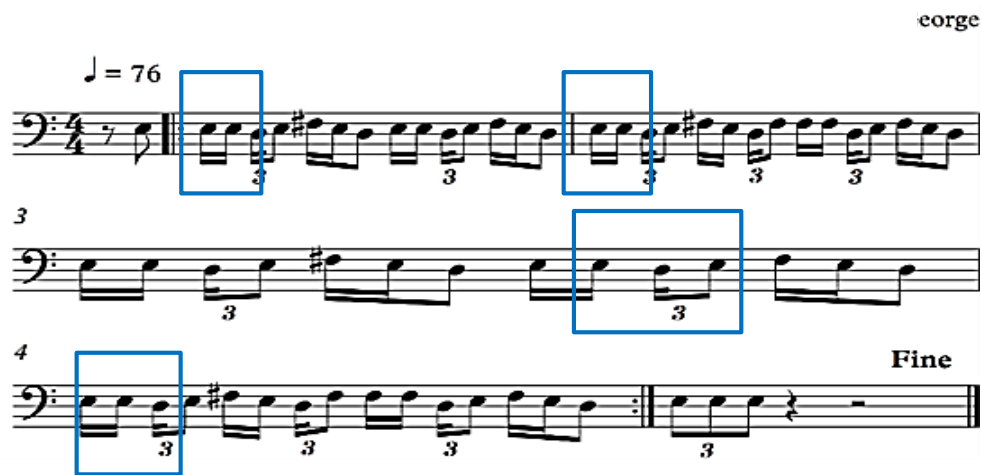


Figure 4: Music notation for *Tavag (mongolimbambang)* in *Mongigol-Sumundai* music ensemble

6. DISCUSSION

This study highlights important musical and cultural elements shared between the Bertitik and Mongigol-Sumundai ensembles, particularly through their use of instruments and rhythmic structures. One key finding is the rhythmic similarity between the two traditions, specifically the presence of *l'istesso tempo*, which maintains a consistent tempo throughout different sections of music. This concept is visually illustrated in Figures 1 through 4, showing how both ensembles achieve rhythmic cohesion despite originating from distinct cultural backgrounds. The persistence of this shared tempo structure suggests a deeper underlying connection in rhythmic practices across musical traditions in Sabah.

Additionally, the research uncovers how gender roles play a crucial part in the Bertitik ensemble's performance. As shown in Table 3, specific instruments are traditionally assigned to certain genders, reinforcing cultural norms that dictate who can play which instruments. This division of roles highlights the strong influence of cultural expectations on performance practice. In some instances, any deviation from these gender norms is viewed as inappropriate, signaling the community's commitment to preserving tradition and continuity in performance practices.

The study's transcription of music is informed by the researchers' use of bi-musicality, which involves a deep engagement with the musical styles of both ensembles from an insider's perspective. This allows for a more accurate portrayal of musical traditions that may not conform to Western standards of notation. Despite differences in notation systems, the transcriptions shown in Figures 1–4 successfully capture the distinct musical identities of both ensembles. This methodological approach emphasizes the importance of cultural context in understanding musical practices, stressing that these transcriptions are not just about preserving musical data, but also about respecting the unique musical expressions of each community.

Through these analyses, the study illustrates how music serves as both a reflection of cultural identity and a vehicle for maintaining social and cultural norms, particularly in the multi-ethnic setting of Sabah. The shared rhythmic patterns, combined with specific cultural and gendered expectations, underscore how music traditions are deeply intertwined with the fabric of community life. The findings encourage further research into the ways in which cultural traditions shape and influence musical practices, especially in multi-cultural contexts.

7. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this comparative analysis of the *Bertitik* and *Mongigol-Sumundai* musical ensembles highlights the rich cultural diversity and distinct musical identities of the Bajau Samah and Rungus communities in Sabah. The study reveals significant similarities, particularly in rhythmic aspects, while also emphasizing the unique performance practices shaped by gender roles and cultural norms within each group. By utilizing the concept of "bi-musicality," the research offers valuable insights into the preservation and adaptation of these musical traditions amid modernization and cultural exchange. Ultimately, the findings underscore the importance of music as a vital expression of cultural identity, social cohesion, and intergroup relations, encouraging further exploration of the intricate connections between music, culture, and community in multi-ethnic settings like Sabah.

Authors' Contributions

MHA – Organise and write the paper. Principle Researcher.

MAS – Recording, transcribe the recorded music. Co-Researcher.

MNN – Editing and proofreading the paper. Co-Researcher

SFA – Recording, transcribe the recorded music. Co-Researcher

NAMR – Transcribe the interview and observation data. CO-Researcher

Acknowledgement

This research was conducted under the Fundamental Research Grant Scheme (FRGS) FRGS/1/2019/WAB04/UPSI/02/2, funded by the Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia. The authors wish to express their sincere appreciation to Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI) for their assistance in managing the grant.

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