Performing History: Reimagining Traditional Ritual Music of Sabah for Contemporary Performance as a Means of Conservation

Introduction

It is a balmy evening in the city of Kota Kinabalu on the 18th of July 2018, and the energy in our green room is positively electric. As I look around at the excitement and joy on the musicians' faces, I wonder what our Sabahan audience will think when they see us take the stage: a Sabahan contemporary singer-songwriter, performing a suite of cross-cultural collaborative music with the help of 43 concert musicians, who have travelled all the way from Tasmania.

Born and raised in this very same city, my initial venture into music began as a jazz vocalist, culminating in two albums strongly rooted in jazz and popular music styles. Consequently, when my focus shifted to songwriting, I relied heavily on Western popular music idioms for inspiration and themes to shape my songs. In 2010, I relocated to Australia to study and conduct research at the University of Tasmania's Conservatorium of Music. Towards the end of my undergraduate study, I began to question the significant lack of Sabahan themes in my own musical narratives.

When I was growing up in Kota Kinabalu, there was minimal access to traditional Sabahan music. What little I was exposed to took the form of stage presentations at school events and official ceremonies. No forms of traditional music were taught in school. Interestingly, however, there was ample opportunity to learn Western instruments such as the piano and violin. By contrast, there was never occasion to hold, let alone play, traditional instruments; they were novelty items bought by tourists as souvenirs. As a modern-day

immigrant in Australia, I found myself increasingly reflecting on the country and family I had left behind, and how I could remember them in my music. Inspired by this sentiment, I was moved to acquaint myself with traditional music from my homeland, and to see how elements of our rich musical heritage could be incorporated into my own work.

This chapter documents a practice-based research project focused on traditional folk songs of Sabah, Malaysia, and their possible application to contemporary composition for performance. For this project, the 'historical artefacts' took the form of four folk songs. These songs were closely analysed, presenting contextual background information and revealing their distinctive musical characteristics, which were subsequently used in combination with Western contemporary genres to produce new pieces for performance. This experiment with cross-cultural music has created an opportunity to analyse forms of music that are largely unknown outside of Sabah. The resulting new works have the potential to generate exposure of and interest in traditional Sabahan folk music among a new audience, and to encourage a revival of interest within the Sabahan community in its own traditional music heritage.

Background

Known to locals as "The Land Below the Wind," the Malaysian state of Sabah is located in the northern region of the island of Borneo, sharing borders with the Malaysian state of Sarawak, the Indonesian region of Kalimantan and the Southern Philippines. Sabah is home to thirty-two officially recognised indigenous tribes, all of which have unique cultural identities and musical traditions.[1] At the start of this project, it was unclear to me why a local such as myself had had limited exposure to our diverse traditions of music. As the pieces of

[1] Jacqueline Pugh-Kitingan, *Selected Papers on Music in Sabah* (Sabah: Universiti Malaysia Sabah, 2004), 3.

the puzzle unfolded, however, it became apparent to me that the price of modernity had proved to be heavy indeed.

As with many other cultures in the region, the rapid process of Westernisation in Malaysia has developed at the expense of its traditions.[2] The invasion of Western arts has caused numerous cultural traditions to disappear slowly without documentation.[3] Sadly, Sabah has not been spared. As early as 1910, ethnographer and archaeologist Ivor H.N. Evans observed in *Among Primitive Peoples in Borneo*:

> Unfortunately the process of disintegration and decay has often been aided and hastened by the efforts of well-meaning but misguided missionaries and others, who, instead of attempting to arrest the progress of many of the innovations, which have been partly responsible for the decay of savage races, have deliberately aided in their adoption, and have done everything in their power to break down old customs, religious or otherwise.[4]

It was important for me to discover that customarily, music did not exist in a theatrical form in Sabah.[5] Rather, it was a fundamental part of the many rituals and social events of each tribe, such as wedding celebrations, religious ceremonies and harvest festivals.[6] As these ceremonies have been modernised over time, the corresponding musical traditions have also begun to disappear. Whereas previously gong music would have featured prominently at a wedding, nowadays it is more popular to hire a local band or a karaoke set.[7]

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[2] Charles de Ledesma, "At the Crossroads: Malaysian Music Fights for Survival" in *World Music*, ed. Simon Broughton et al (London: The Rough Guides, 1994), 433.
[3] Margaret J. Kartomi, "Traditional Music Weeps and Other Themes in the Discourse on Music, Dance and Theatre of Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 26, No.2 (Sep 1995): 367.
[4] Ivor H. N. Evans, *Among Primitive Peoples in Borneo* (London: Seeley, Service & Co., 1922), 32.
[5] Edward Frame, "The Musical Instruments of Sabah, Malaysia," *Ethnomusicology*, Vol.26, No.2 (May 1982): 248.
[6] Frame, *Musical Instruments*, 248.
[7] Pugh-Kitingan, *Selected Papers,* 64.

Another significant factor in the decline of Sabah's musical traditions lies in its conventionally informal music practices and education. In the past, "musicians" were individuals who displayed musical talent, regardless of class or gender.[8] The passing of musical knowledge happened through a process of enculturation rather than formal instruction.[9] This means that if a child demonstrated any musical inclination, he would learn by emulating the adult musicians.[10] Previously, families gathered at the end of the day to play music, tell stories and produce crafts, thus ensuring the transfer of cultural knowledge from generation to generation.[11] Nowadays, new technologies have replaced these traditions as sources of entertainment, effectively hindering the vital process of enculturation and transmission.[12] In his 1982 survey of traditional Sabahan musical instruments, author Edward Frame concluded:

> In doing research in Sabah I was constantly aware that many musical forms and instruments will soon disappear from the society because there are few young people interested in performing. Certain forms (such as the beating of the gongs) remain strong, but others (such as the playing of the *suling* and *sundatang*) are becoming rare.[13]

Learning this made me more determined than ever to acquaint myself with these musical forms that were fast disappearing for my people. The question then became, how does one learn tribal music thousands of miles from any tribal musicians to learn from? Was it possible to learn via other means, and if so, what resources were available to me? Had other Sabahan musicians attempted similar case studies?

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[8] Frame, *Musical Instruments*, 249; Pugh-Kitingan, *Selected Papers*, 19.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Frame, *Musical Instruments*, 249.
[11] Pugh-Kitingan, *Selected Papers,* 63.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Frame, *Musical Instruments*, 272.

There is very little record of these musical traditions in printed sources or audio and visual recordings. Most of the scholarly works available are anthropological or ethnomusicological in nature, focusing on Sabahan traditional instruments and rituals. The music of Sabah has also been mentioned in various encyclopedias and reference books. These articles often focus on music from a geographical perspective, providing some information on Sabahan music in the context of Malaysia or Borneo (Sabah, Sarawak, Brunei, Kalimantan).[14] A number of significant focused studies on traditional Sabahan music have been conducted by Dr. Jacqueline Pugh-Kitingan, who holds the Kadazandusun Chair at the Universiti Malaysia Sabah. Her compilation of research papers was published as *Selected Papers on Music in Sabah* in 2004, and remains the most detailed study of Sabahan traditional music that has been published thus far.[15] Pugh-Kitingan continues to document and examine ritual music and dance across ethnic groups in Sabah, the most recent of which focused on Dusunic tribes.[16]

When I recalled the limited Sabahan traditional music I had access to in my youth, the music of the Kadazandusun people stood out above the other tribes. Despite not having any familial ties to this tribe, I was familiar with their popular form of music and dance called the *sumazau*. The Kadazandusun are the largest ethnic group in Sabah.[17] In the many dialects of the Kadazandusun tribes, there are various terms for dance.[18] They include '*magarang*', '*sumayau*', '*mongigol*', and in the case of the Kadazandusun of the Penampang district, '*sumazau*'.[19] While the *sumazau* is more recently popular as a social dance, in former times it

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[14] Matusky, *Borneo: Sabah, Sarawak, Brunei, Kalimantan*, 406–414.
[15] Pugh-Kitingan, *Selected Papers*.
[16] Pugh-Kitingan, "Balancing the Human and Spiritual Worlds: Ritual, Music, and Dance Among Dusunic Societies in Sabah," *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, Vol. 46 (2014), 170–190.
[17] Arnold Puyok and Tony Paridi Bagang, "Ethnicity, Culture and Indigenous Leadership in Modern Politics: The Case of the Kadazandusun in Sabah, East Malaysia" in *Kajian Malaysia*, Vol. 29, Supp. 1, 2011, p. 177.
[18] Author Unknown, "Kadazan Dusun" in *Siri Etnik Sabah ITBM – UMS*, edited by Jacqueline Pugh-Kitingan (Kuala Lumpur: Institut Terjemahan & Buku Malaysia, 2012), p. 182.
[19] Jacqueline Pugh-Kitingan, "Dance and Ritual in Sabah," in Sharing Identities: Celebrating Dance in Malaysia, edited by Mohd Anis Md Nor and Stephanie Burridge (New Delhi: Routledge, 2011), p. 170; Author

played a role in rituals to connect with the spirit world.[20] These days, it is commonly found at a variety of events, including staged festivals, concerts, and even church services.[21] How did the *sumazau* transition from its traditional ritual roles to the public domain, where it continues to engage a wider audience as an iconic cultural element of the Sabahan identity?[22] In his chapter about musical sustainability, Schippers discusses "successful" musics and their ability to "brave major changes in context, while other musics continue to struggle."[23] In this context, how has the *sumazau* been preserved, while other forms of Sabahan traditional music continue to disappear? In order to better understand the transformation of the *sumazau* from the sacred to the secular, it was necessary for me to delve deeper into its history, and the history of its people.

Traditionally, the Kadazandusun subsisted on agriculture, primarily cultivating rice, along with fruit trees and vegetables.[24] The stages of their rice planting involved rituals performed by their priestesses.[25] The essential parts of these ritual performances included drum-beating, a gong ensemble and the *sumazau*. The *sumazau* was also performed in other contexts, for example to cure illness, to allow a good harvest, and during celebrations such as wedding ceremonies. [26]

Unlike the interior tribes of Sabah, the geographical location of the Kadazandusun allowed them early access to education. In 1882, the Catholic Mill Hill Mission opened

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Unknown, "Kadazan Dusun" in *Siri Etnik Sabah ITBM – UMS*, edited by Jacqueline Pugh-Kitingan (Kuala Lumpur: Institut Terjemahan & Buku Malaysia, 2012), p. 182.

[20] Hanafi Hussin, "Performing Arts as Healing Ritual Tools: Drum Beating and Sumazau Dance in Monogit Ritual of Penamapang Kadazan of Sabah", in *JATI (Jurnal Jabatan Pengajian Asia Tenggara)*, Vol. 11 (2006), p. 10.

[21] Hanafi Hussin, Judeth John Baptist and Jacqueline Pugh-Kitingan, "Enriching The Soundscape and Dancescape of Sabah Through Sumazau" in *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 23, No 2 (2018), p. 198.

[22] Ibid, 182.

[23] Huib Schippers, "From *Ca Tru* to the World: Understanding and Facilitating Musical Sustainability," in Music Autoethnographies: Making Autoethnography Sing/ Making Music Personal, edited by Brydie-Leigh Batleet and Carolyn Ellis (Bowen Hills: Australian Academic Press, 2009), p. 206.

[24] Hanafi Hussin, Judeth John Baptist and Jacqueline Pugh-Kitingan, "Enriching The Soundscape and Dancescape of Sabah Through Sumazau" in *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 23, No 2 (2018), p. 198

[25] Hanafi Hussin, Judeth John Baptist and Jacqueline Pugh-Kitingan, "Enriching The Soundscape and Dancescape of Sabah Through Sumazau" in *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 23, No 2 (2018), p. 187.

[26] Ibid, p. 183.

schools for the indigenous population on the West coast, where the current capital city of Kota Kinabalu lies.[27] The Mill Hill schools taught literacy to their students through their local dialect and progressively shifted to English by the third or fourth year.[28] In the 1950s and 60s, a small group of educated Catholic locals emerged from these schools with the ability to speak and write confidently in both English and a romanised version of their language.[29] This gave rise to a "Society of Kadazans" in 1953, who were dedicated to the protection and preservation of their culture.[30] This nationalist movement was further manifested in the publication of their own "Kadazan Corner" in the local newspaper, a Kadazan dictionary, and the first radio broadcast in their own language.[31] The local response to their daily radio programme was so enthusiastic that by 1960, "Radio Sabah" was transmitting in the Kadazan language for fourteen hours a week.

The Kadazan radio station was largely staffed by Kadazans from the Penampang district, and played a crucial role in the development of their local music in the early 60s. The popularity of their radio programme created a need for local music, and since there were no commercial records available in the local dialect at the time, much of their library (approximately four hundred pieces) was recorded in its studio.[32] The earliest and most comprehensive compilation of Sabahan sound recordings was made by Dr. Ivan Polunin in the late 1950s and released in 1961 as *Murut Music of North Borneo* on the Folkways label.[33] As the demand for Kadazandusun music grew, local record labels such as Kinabalu Records

[27] Anthony Reid, "Endangered Identity: Kadazan or Dusun in Sabah (East Malaysia)," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 28, 1 (March 1997): 125.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid, 126.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Anthony Reid, "Endangered Identity: Kadazan or Dusun in Sabah (East Malaysia)," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 28, 1 (March 1997): 126.
[33] Ivan Polunin, *Murut Music of North Borneo*, Folkways Records, FE4459, LP, 1961.

began recording the music on vinyl for local distribution.[34] Unfortunately, these recordings are rare, and it was not possible to access them for this project.

As the worldview of the Kadazandusun has evolved over time, so too have their life routines and practices. Changes to their economic, social and political aspects have sparked a need to preserve their identity.[35] While modern lifestyles have replaced their rice cultivation practices, their rice farming rituals have been adapted for the stage.[36] The *sumazau* continues to be performed during their annual harvest festival (Kaamatan) as well as state gatherings, often in combination with modern instrumentation and arrangements. *Sumazau* dance and music traditions also continue to be passed on via classes for children at village community halls. This legacy of Kadazan music continues to manifest itself in the local popular music being produced in Sabah today. Many Kadazandusun popular songs incorporate elements of the *sumazau*, helping to cement it as an iconic part of Kadazan heritage, as well as the Sabahan identity.[37]

While the prominence of the Kadazan community as a major tribe of Sabah has allowed the continuation and popularity of its music, the music of many other indigenous tribes has not been exploited, and is rarely heard outside of its tribal settings. The *sumazau* is a compelling example of how traditional music can be conserved for successive generations, despite the loss of its ritual context.

Methods

Now that I was equipped with this new knowledge, where to next? Reflecting on the success of the Kadazandusun tribe in conserving their *sumazau*, I wondered if I could draw

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[34] Ibid.
[35] Hanafi Hussin, Judeth John Baptist and Jacqueline Pugh-Kitingan, "Enriching The Soundscape and Dancescape of Sabah Through Sumazau" in *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 23, No 2 (2018), p. 196.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid, 181.

from their example to benefit the music of other tribes. Could other forms of Sabahan traditional music also be adapted for the stage, in combination with contemporary music themes and instrumentation? What methodology and methods would I need to achieve this? Schipper discusses the work of "applied" ethnomusicologists, whose approach "… acknowledges recontextualisation of performance practices, institutionalising transmission processes, changing audiences and markets in terms of business models and technology, as well as increasingly fluid relationships between ethnic background and musical tastes/activities, particularly in relation to youth culture."[38]

In its authentic setting, music in Sabah was not actively taught. Instead, it was passed down through the process of enculturation. A child who was interested in learning an instrument did so through observation and direct participation. To learn the nuances of Sabahan traditional music forms, it appeared necessary for me to undergo a similar process, in a practice-based research project utilising autoethnographic methods. The use of autoethnography in the field of music research is gaining momentum, "fuelled by increasing numbers of musicians wanting to examine, understand and communicate the personal stories behind their creative experiences."[39] Ellis and Bochner describe projects in this genre as "distinctly characterised by a focus on intimate involvement, engagement, and embodied participation."[40]

Without Sabahan people to engage with directly, I needed to access the music in other ways. The album that served as my main reference for this project is a collection of 20

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[38] Huib Schippers, "From *Ca Tru* to the World: Understanding and Facilitating Musical Sustainability," in Music Autoethnographies: Making Autoethnography Sing/ Making Music Personal, edited by Brydie-Leigh Bartleet and Carolyn Ellis (Bowen Hills: Australian Academic Press, 2009), p. 204.
[39] Brydie-Leigh Bartleet and Carolyn Ellis, Music Autoethnographies: Making Autoethnography Sing/ Making Music Personal, p. 6.
[40] Carolyn S. Ellis and Arthur P. Bochner, "Analysing Analytic Autoethnography: An Autopsy," in Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, Vol 35, No 4 (August 2006) p. 434.

traditional folk songs entitled *Traditional Music of Sabah*.[41] Each piece on the recording is unique to a tribe or geographical region of Sabah. Due to the extensive and varied nature of traditional Sabahan music, the scope of the study was limited to four folk songs as the material for inspiration. The four traditional Sabahan music forms chosen for this project were the *titikas* of the Orang Sungai, the Suluk *daling-daling*, the *adai-adai* from the West coast of Sabah, and the *sumazau* of the Kadazandusun tribe. My method of study involved researching the history behind each of the folk songs, then analysing and immersing myself in the songs to gain an understanding of their function, style, form and instrumentation. Each song offered unique characteristics that could be exploited in the compositional process, and fused with my knowledge of Western contemporary composition where possible.

Gaining a musical understanding of the material required an immersive and approximation-based approach. In a music learning context, Barrett describes this as the franchise to 'have a go'.[42] She highlights the element of approximation as a crucial part of the learning process, as it allows the learner to evaluate and refine his work in its proximity to the desired outcome. So, I started by first listening to the audio example, followed by a period of teaching myself to play and, in the case of the vocal pieces, sing the song. Often, this process would highlight aspects of the piece that I could utilise in the compositional process. In the compositional phase, I reflected on the distinctive characteristics of each musical form, and how they could be recontextualised incorporating contemporary Western themes. As I did not have the advantage of speaking any of the tribal dialects associated with these musical forms, I opted to write lyrics in the English language. I did, however, look to my own personal history and ties with these tribes to influence the narratives of the new pieces to reinforce the Sabahan connection.

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[41] *Traditional Music of Sabah*, from author's personal collection. As the compact disc cover did not offer any label or disc number, a reference could not be provided.
[42] Margaret Barrett, "Music Education and the Natural Learning Model," in Teaching Music, edited by Gary Spruce (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 64.

The meanings and stories behind music autoethnographies gain further significance through performance, by engaging and challenging the audience on various levels, including the intellectual, embodied and emotional.[43] Once the pieces were composed, the crucial conclusion to the project was for them to be performed. Recruiting the Derwent Valley Concert Band (DVCB) to my cause, I worked closely with Melbourne-based arranger and orchestrator Mark Buys to create arrangements for the pieces in Western concert band format. I then returned to Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, to premiere this suite of new works with the DVCB in July 2018 to a Sabahan audience.

The following sections document this journey, outlining a historical overview and musical analysis of the *titikas*, and the piece that was subsequently written and arranged for performance. I also reflect on the challenges of this research project, as a Sabahan composer trying to make sense and music out of limited fragments of a traditional music history far away in time and place from the land and people to which it belongs.

Phase One: Analysis

My primary motive in choosing the *titikas* for this project was one of personal history, as my paternal great-grandmother was from an Orang Sungai tribe. This traditional form of music was also the focus of a recent study which was fundamental to my own project. In this ethnomusicological study, a small group of scholars travelled to Bukit Garam to observe *titikas* music performed by the Orang Sungai tribe.[44] Based on interviews, recordings and transcriptions, they provided a detailed musical analysis of the *titikas*, encompassing musical structure and scales, melodic contours, forms and rhythmic patterns. While studies of the

[43] Brydie-Leigh Bartleet and Carolyn Ellis, Music Autoethnographies: Making Autoethnography Sing/ Making Music Personal, p. 10.
[44] Ian Stephen Baxter, Agnes Ku Chun Moi, Jinky Jane Simeon and Andrew Poninting, "An Analysis of Orang Sungai Music at Bukit Garam, Sandakan," in *Essays on World Music and Preservation*, edited by Loo Fung Chiat, Loo Fung Ying and Mohd Nasir Hashim, (Germany: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2012), 13–41.

Orang Sungai tribe do exist , the majority of them have concentrated primarily on ethnographic elements such as demographics, culture and belief systems.[45] The Bukit Garam study is rare and important in archiving indigenous Sabahan music, and passing on musical knowledge to successive generations.

The *titikas* is a form of instrumental music belonging to the Orang Sungai tribe of Sabah. "Orang Sungai" translates to "river people," and refers to the people who settled along the Kinabatangan, the longest river in Sabah. The Orang Sungai music ensembles that perform the *titikas* are distinctive in that their instruments are made from wood, instead of the metal gong ensembles of the coastal tribes. The four main instruments used in the Orang Sungai music ensembles are the *gabang*, *kantung*, *gong kayu* and *gandang tambur*. The primary instrument is the *gabang*, a wooden xylophone commonly made out of *pogil* or *mangkapun* wood, both of which are abundant in the area. The *gabang* consists of eight to twelve flat wooden plates laid on a horizontal frame in order of pitch, starting with the lowest pitch to the left of the performer, with a tuning system related to the pentatonic scale.

Figure 1. A *gabang*. Reproduced by permission from Ian Stephen Baxter et al., "*An Analysis of Orang Sungai Music at Bukit Garam, Sandakan*," in *Essays on World Music and Preservation*, edited by Loo Fung Chiat, Loo Fung Ying and Mohd Nasir Hashim, Germany: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2012.

[45] Ibid, 13.

The *kantung* are slit-gongs made from wood or bamboo. The *kantung* player provides an underlying rhythmic pulse, while the rest of the ensemble plays counter-rhythms. The *gong kayu* is a variation of the *gabang*, consisting of four large wooden plates that produce low frequencies. The *gandang tambur* drum completes the ensemble. It is a single-headed drum which utilises goatskin or cowhide stretched across the top of a hollowed log.

The *titikas* is played differently each time, as it is heavily improvised on by its performers. It relies primarily on the *gabang* player, who introduces a motif which is then developed and extemporised upon by the ensemble. The audio version of the *titikas* that I was able to access opens with the *gabang* player, who begins the piece by playing a scale. This is to provide the listeners with a basis for the tonality of the piece. The *gabang* player then establishes a motif consisting of quavers and semi-quavers spanning a bar in common time (see Figure 2). This phrase is picked up by the percussionist, who mimics the rhythmic pattern. The rhythmic pattern remains constant throughout this piece, while the melody is extemporised using the other notes of the scale. The intensity remains constant throughout the duration of the piece, creating a trance-like quality.

Figure 2. Traditional folk song, *Titikas*, opening scale followed by motif.

Like the *sumazau*, the *titikas* is passed down orally, and performers rely on memory to play the pieces.[46] However, there is a strong element of improvisation in this music. While the term *titikas* is used to broadly describe the style of Orang Sungai music, the musical elements of this form can vary depending on the area in which the music is played, depending

[46] Ian Stephen Baxter, Agnes Ku Chun Moi, Jinky Jane Simeon and Andrew Poninting, "An Analysis of Orang Sungai Music at Bukit Garam, Sandakan," in *Essays on World Music and Preservation*, edited by Loo Fung Chiat, Loo Fung Ying and Mohd Nasir Hashim, (Germany: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2012), 18.

on the musical (and improvisational) abilities of the performers.[47] The *titikas* is most commonly performed during Orang Sungai wedding ceremonies. It is also occasionally played at harvest festivals to accompany dance and to welcome important guests.[48]

Phase Two: Composition

1. Source

Before I composed a piece based on the *titikas*, I first considered its unique elements. A fundamental aspect of the *titikas* is that it is largely improvised, albeit within a loose structure. Both the melodic and rhythmic motifs are established in the first few bars of the piece, and it has a strong pulse centred in simple duple time. These components form a strong basis for the ensemble to improvise and expand upon. With these observations in mind, I set out to compose a new piece to 'hero' the motif transcribed in Figure 3, with a focus on emphasising the textural quality of the *titikas*. Without an ensemble, the challenge then was to re-create the layered effect of the *titikas* in a solo performance format. This initiated the idea of experimenting with a loop pedal, a microphone and my voice. The general concept was to sing the primary motif of the *titikas* and loop it in real time, adding vocal layers to expand on the original idea. Through several sessions of trial and error, I was able to refine and loosely fix these vocal layers, which I would be able to recreate in a performance setting.

The result of these experiments is a piece entitled "Source." It begins with the primary motif, which is sung and layered. This is followed with a simple percussive rhythm to provide a pulse to the piece. Once these two layers are established, low notes are sung to establish a harmonic centre. With a bass line in place, I would sing a secondary motif, which

[47] Ibid, 35.
[48] Ibid, 27.

is a harmonic part a minor third above the original motivic melody. This results in a bed of music, as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Excerpt from "Source," bars 13–15.

As the *titikas* is an instrumental form of music, I debated over the appropriateness of singing any lyrical verses in my composition. Historically, the *titikas* ensemble played to accompany dance. However, I lacked both an ensemble to play with me and the dancers to play for. To make it a compelling performance piece, I felt that this modernised version of the *titikas* required a new context. How could it, as Bartleet and Ellis asked, be representative of something bigger than a personal creation, and also demonstrate a dynamic relationship between the self and the social and cultural context of creation?[49] For me, the answer lay in my connection to this tribe and their music. Drawing from this, the resulting short verse is a strong statement about my family ties and its connection to the Kinabatangan river, where the Orang Sungai are from:

I was born from very strong women
I was born from very strong men
Like a river, and its continuous flow
I have come before, and so too shall I go

There are three ways in which "Source" is tied strongly to the *titikas*. The first is that it establishes a primary motif at the start of the piece, and continues to expand on that motif

[49] Brydie-Leigh Bartleet and Carolyn Ellis, Music Autoethnographies: Making Autoethnography Sing/ Making Music Personal, p. 9.

as the piece progresses. The layers provided by the *titikas* ensemble are emulated in "Source" by using a loop pedal to create vocal layers. Finally, once the 'bed of noise' is established, I can improvise freely over the music, drawing from my jazz knowledge to produce an active, spontaneously creative piece that is quite different each time it is performed. As seen in Figure 5, however, "Source" is not limited to a pentatonic scale. Western contemporary harmony is freely employed, incorporating major seven (see Figure 3: bar 13, beat 1), minor seven (see Figure 3: bar 13, beat 2) and half diminished chords (see Figure, 3, bar 13, beat 3) that are not normally found in traditional Sabahan music. Baxter et al observed that the *titikas* was loud in nature and played at a consistent intensity throughout the performance. [50] While I chose to emulate this trance-like quality of the *titikas* in the initial part of the song, the addition of an improvised melodic verse provides the opportunity for the dynamic intensity of the piece to grow as it progresses. As "Source" was intended for performance, this allows for dynamic expression to reinforce the words to the song, thus creating better interest for an audience.

Phase Three: Arrangement

While "Source" was originally intended as a solo vocal piece, the opportunity to re-imagine it in a Western concert band format created new scope for me to experiment with and make a stronger connection to the original instrumentation of the *titikas*. In the initial stage of the arrangement process, I had to provide arranger and orchestrator Mark Buys with background information about the project. We discussed the history of the *titikas*, its general

[50] Ian Stephen Baxter, Agnes Ku Chun Moi, Jinky Jane Simeon and Andrew Poninting, "An Analysis of Orang Sungai Music at Bukit Garam, Sandakan," in *Essays on World Music and Preservation*, edited by Loo Fung Chiat, Loo Fung Ying and Mohd Nasir Hashim, (Germany: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2012), 33.

mood, texture and narrative, and how we could use the timbral textures of the concert band instruments to emulate some of the traditional instruments of the Orang Sungai.

As seen in Figure 4, the concert band arrangement for "Source" begins with the percussion section introducing the rhythm for 4 bars, followed with a variation of the *titikas* motif on the xylophone in C minor. This continues for 8 bars to establish the rhythm, pulse and energy of the piece before the saxophone section brings in the original *titikas* motif (see Figure 2), as illustrated in Figure 5.

Figure 4: Opening bars 1–8 of "Source," as arranged for DVCB by Mark Buys.

Figure 5: *Titikas* motif, as arranged for saxophone, bars 13–16.

The arrangement staggers the entry of the instruments, creating a similar layered effect to that explored and utilised in the original vocal arrangement. The introduction develops further to create dynamic intensity, before dying away to allow space for the vocal melody. Once the verse concludes at bar 40, the saxophone and trumpet sections take it in turn to reiterate the vocal melody, producing a call and response effect. This erupts into a frenetic descending melody by the flute and piccolo sections, evoking imagery of cascading water. In each case, the cascading melody returns to the *titikas* with a restatement of the original motif, as illustrated in Figure 6.

Figure 6: Flute and piccolo sections, bars 49–56.

Retaining as many characteristics of the *titikas* as possible continued to be an essential consideration in the arranging phase. It was important to both myself and Buys to retain some level of improvisation in the arrangement. Therefore, while the instrumentation of the piece was fixed, the arrangement allowed the vocal melody to be loosely improvised during performance. Similar to the initial vocal arrangement of "Source," Buys' arrangement adhered to the motivic, layered texture of the *titikas*. The use of the xylophone in the concert band allowed a stronger timbral connection to the *gabang*, something that the human voice was unable to achieve so successfully. Overall, the use of Western instruments to interpret this traditional Sabahan music was rewarding, in that some sounds of the Sabahan instruments could be emulated while the overall sound was still irrefutably Western. This, combined with the free employment of Western chord shapes and harmonies, created a cohesive and unique blend of musical ideas.

Braving New Contexts

Returning to the original idea of this project, can Sabahan traditional music forms be adapted for performance, in combination with contemporary music themes and instrumentation, as a means of conserving their musical heritage? On the basis of my study, the answer is yes. This project has provided me with an opportunity to engage with the history of my people, by investigating and analysing lesser-known traditional Sabahan folk songs as a basis for new compositions. Understanding the history of the *titikas* yielded meaningful insight into its form and function, helping to inform the musical direction and narratives of the new pieces. The creation of these new works has led to various performance opportunities, to both Australian and Malaysian audiences. In this way, a ritual music that

would otherwise have only been heard at a tribal wedding on the banks of the Kinabatangan river has been absorbed into a new body of contemporary works that has been, and can continue to be, performed to new audiences.

In retrospect, the greatest challenge for me during this project was one of geographical distance. Without a tribe to teach me, I had to find other ways to engage with the music and learn its collective history. This was achieved by locating what limited knowledge had been documented and published, and by accessing recordings of these music forms, which were rarer still. Without a written culture, so much of this music has been played and passed down through memory.[51] Documenting the music on paper for future generations, then, is an important first step. The nuances of the music can, however, be difficult to convey via the Western music notation system. During our rehearsals with the DVCB, for example, I had to play the audio samples of the *titikas* to the Tasmanian ensemble in order for them to execute the motifs in an 'authentic' way. Therefore, creating more recordings of the music in its traditional form is equally imperative.

While Tasmania is certainly far from the origin of these musics, my limited access to them is shared even by local Sabahans. In order for the group of Sabahan scholars to observe the *titikas* in situ, for instance, they had to travel to Bukit Garam, a remote area that requires considerable travel from any major town. If we are to see a revival of interest and increase the chances of Sabah's traditional musical heritage surviving into the future, I believe that creating better access to and engagement with the music is a vital part of the solution. A *titikas* ensemble from Bukit Garam has already taken steps in the right direction by training

[51] Ian Stephen Baxter, Agnes Ku Chun Moi, Jinky Jane Simeon and Andrew Poninting, "An Analysis of Orang Sungai Music at Bukit Garam, Sandakan," in *Essays on World Music and Preservation*, edited by Loo Fung Chiat, Loo Fung Ying and Mohd Nasir Hashim, (Germany: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2012), 18.

their youth to play and to perform their music at major festivals around the state.[52] Local efforts such as these are laudable, and could make bigger strides with government support.[53]

The traditional music of Sabah is as diverse as its people, each tribe possessing a musical heritage that is unique in style. This rich musical history of my people provides tremendous scope for further analysis, experimentation, application and performance. While the prospect of their traditional music being recontextualised and performed by 45 Tasmanians a world away from their remote riverbank village may never be imagined by a Sabahan tribe, perhaps it is "major changes in context"[54] such as this that must be braved, if we are to learn how our musical history can be conserved and sustained for future generations.

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[53] Ibid.
[54] Huib Schippers, "From *Ca Tru* to the World: Understanding and Facilitating Musical Sustainability," in Music Autoethnographies: Making Autoethnography Sing/ Making Music Personal, edited by Brydie-Leigh Bartleet and Carolyn Ellis (Bowen Hills: Australian Academic Press, 2009), pg 206.

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