

**NGEBUYAN: ASSESSING YOUNGER GENERATIONS' FAMILIARITY
WITH SARAWAK KENYAH MINORITY ETHNICS' ORAL TRADITION**

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ABSTRACT

The notion of "oral tradition" encompasses a dynamic and diverse medium of oral-aural communication that enables the creation, preservation, and transmission of knowledge on cultural heritage and serves to uphold linguistic diversity and cultural identity. Modernisation and higher literacy rates have decreased younger generations' awareness of indigenous oral traditions despite their integral role in heritage preservation. Thus, this study examines Bumiputera younger generations' familiarity and understanding of minority ethnic oral traditions in Sarawak. One pivotal objective is to safeguard the diminishing Sarawak *Kenyah* oral tradition, notably *Ngebuyan*. This supports UNESCO's SDG 11 of Sustainable Cities and Communities, which includes cultural preservation. This study employs a mixed methodology, primarily descriptive qualitative analysis. The study engaged a total of 109 participants, who are undergraduate students from UiTM Sarawak Branch, Malaysia. The findings showed that a substantial proportion, approximately 86.2%, exhibited a degree of awareness concerning oral traditions in a general context. Notably, 89% demonstrated the ability to differentiate between diverse oral tradition modes. Regrettably, a mere 33% of the respondents were actively involved in practising oral traditions. This observation indicates a gradual decline in the adoption of oral tradition practices as a result of limited participation among younger generations. Therefore, this research serves as a valuable addition to the existing literature, playing a pivotal role in facilitating intergenerational mechanisms for preserving cultural traditions and ensuring their continuous transmission throughout generations to come.

Keywords: Oral tradition; *Ngebuyan*; bumiputera minority ethnic; cultural preservation; Kenyah.

Introduction

Oral tradition involves the passing down of cultural knowledge, customs, and beliefs from one generation to the next through spoken language and narratives. This mode of communication has been a fundamental aspect of human history dating back to ancient times and remains significant in many cultures today. Typically, oral traditions are handed down through verbal communication, often by the elderly, especially during festive gatherings, presenting the preservation of their cultural heritage.

In Sarawak, Malaysia, ethnic minorities possess distinctive cultures that bear testament to their historical importance. Among the various Sarawak ethnic minorities, there exist oral traditions such as *pantun*, *jawang*, *ganu*, and *sanggai*, as well as ritual chants like *sampi*, *biau*, *sabak*, *timang*, and *renung* (Vinson & Joanne, 2001). These traditions serve as repositories of cultural heritage and are integral to the identities of these ethnic groups.

The core cultural values symbolised in oral traditions can become aspirational ideals. Recontextualizing the essence and dynamics of culture and human-environment interactions, specifically looking at how culture may influence environmental, political, social, and economic dimensions of development in Sarawak, is vital in sustaining relational conceptions of place and space and embodied senses of place. On that account, efforts to teach and make the younger generations aware of these are evident. Here, the researchers feel that efforts need to be put and geared mainly in utilising digital technologies in documenting Sarawak's minority oral traditions such as *Ngebuyan* so it can reach global citizens, particularly the younger generations.

Background of the study

Prior researchers have predominantly disregarded the intangible cultural heritage of various minority indigenous groups, which has become a focal point of interest for current researchers. Lenzerini (2011) underscored the concerning trend of a continuous decline in the preservation of genuine cultural heritage, noting that we witness the irrevocable loss of languages, knowledge, skills, customs, and ideas worldwide, leading to a gradual impoverishment of human society. Given the pervasive influence of modern technologies in this millennial era, it becomes imperative for the younger generations to embrace and sustain these cultural legacies. Consequently, this underscores the need for an inquiry into the extent of awareness among the younger generations regarding their culture's oral traditions.

To formulate preservation strategies for an oral tradition, it is crucial to assess the level of familiarity among younger generations. Given the focus of this research on Sarawak's oral heritage, selecting Bumiputera students was deemed the optimal initial approach. This decision aims to initiate the preservation of *Ngebuyan*, which is one of the fading Sarawak Kenyah's ethnomusicology due to the increasing literacy of the younger generation and strong ascent of modernisation. This also aligns with the objectives of UNESCO's Sustainable Development Goal number 11, which is focused on fostering Sustainable Cities and Communities, specifically emphasising the preservation of our global cultural heritage.

Ngebuyan, also known as *Kenyah Ngurek* holds a significant place within the cultural tapestry of the Kenyah minority in Sarawak. It is an oral tradition that is deeply ingrained in the community's social fabric, often performed during special occasions or intimate family gatherings. These occasions serve as platforms for celebrating milestones such as weddings, offering advice to young individuals embarking on

journeys, whether travel, work, or further studies, and also for heartfelt expressions of emotions. Ngebuyan consists of *Suket* (song and poem) or *Ketena'* (storytelling) and these narratives are woven with cultural motifs, historical anecdotes, and moral teachings, fostering a sense of identity and belonging among the Kenyah people. Remarkably, Ngebuyan is a tradition open to participation by all members of the community. However, leadership within these performances is typically assumed by individuals who have undergone formal training or have acquired proficiency in the art of Ngebuyan. As a cultural cornerstone, Ngebuyan preserves Kenyah heritage and strengthens family and community ties by passing down knowledge through generations. However, even so, to what extent young generations are familiar with Ngebuyan? In exploring their familiarity with this unique tradition, it becomes apparent that this study offers valuable insights into young generations' familiarity with oral traditions in Sarawak, particularly on Ngebuyan.

It is widely acknowledged that intangible cultural heritage, particularly oral traditions, is at risk of extinction due to inadequate preservation efforts, most notably the lack of written documentation (Marett & Barwick, 2006). According to Wan et al. (2018), the lack of comprehensive documentation efforts is a significant factor contributing to the endangerment of oral traditions, particularly in Malaysia. Without immediate action, a substantial portion, if not more, of these oral traditions will disappear in the future as the result of globalisation's relentless advance.

In addition to that, past investigations have revealed a concerning lack of awareness among the younger generation in Malaysia regarding their own culture and traditions. For instance, Albattat et al. (2016) discovered that Malaysian university students possess limited knowledge of Sarawak's traditional art and ethnic cultures. This decline in cultural awareness can be attributed to the forces of modernisation and globalisation. Additionally, the *Iban* traditional attire has gradually relinquished its authentic elements due to the modern fashion trends introduced by the contemporary Iban community, a consequence of modernization (Wan Juliana Emeih Wahed & Pitil, 2018). Julia (2016) further argues that the younger generation, heavily influenced by globalisation, has developed a preference for popular art over traditional forms, leading to a diminishing appreciation for the latter. This shift in preference has put many traditional arts at risk of extinction due to a lack of public awareness.

Research Objective and Research Questions

The primary focus of this paper is to assess the extent of familiarity that younger generations have with the oral traditions of ethnic minorities in Sarawak. This study will address questions: (1) Are the younger generations familiar with the concept of oral tradition?, (2) Do younger generations possess an understanding of their own oral tradition and engage in its practice?, (3) Are the younger generations interested in discovering and understanding the oral traditions of Sarawak's ethnic minorities?, and (4) Are the younger generations acquainted with the Kenyah minority's oral tradition known as *Ngebuyan*?

Literature Review

Oral traditions

Oral tradition is the practice of receiving, preserving, and passing down knowledge, ideas, and cultural materials in verbal art from one generation to the next. It carries history and cultural heritage conveyed in one specific culture by the non-literate

indigenous. It conveys stories in the aspect of culture that involves indigenous languages, culture and history (Wan et. al., 2018), which are meant to be learned and internalised and it is crucial to be preserved. Oral tradition is “a classification of a genre that should have been transmitted over several generations and to some extent be the common property of a group of people” (Henige, 1988, p.232). However, oral traditions are not usually documented and leading it to be faded in this modern era.

Recording and documenting oral traditions should be a concern by the authorities to preserve and protect the traditions of the non-literate communities. In Asia, particularly Malaysia, there have been studies done on oral traditions in Malay culture such as shadow play (*wayang kulit*) (Scott-Kemball, 1959; Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof, 1997), Shamans (Haron Daud, 2010), *gendang keling*, *gamelan*, *dikir barat* and *mak'yong* (Malm, 1974). However, in the context of Sarawak, which is situated on the east coast of Malaysia, the focus has predominantly been on the oral traditions of the majority ethnic groups, such as the Dayaks, specifically the Ibans and the Bidayus. These studies have delved into various aspects of their oral traditions, including traditional songs like *pantun*, *jawang*, *ganu*, and *sanggai*, as well as ritual chants like *sampi* (Saripah et. al., 2021); *biau* (Dato, Sandai & Dermawan, 2020), *sabak*, *timbang*, and *renung* (Vinson & Joanne, 2001). It is unfortunate that there is a lack of research on the minority ethnic group like the Kenyah in Sarawak. Encouraging studies that focus on the Kenyah can provide valuable insights as all these traditions can serve as repositories of cultural heritage and are integral to the identities of its ethnic groups.

Language and oral tradition share a symbiotic relationship. Oral traditions are typically transmitted from older generations to newer ones through verbal or oral communication, making language the vessel through which these valuable cultural narratives are passed down. Consequently, oral tradition possesses the power to shape the perceptions of younger generations, prompting them to reevaluate and establish their national identity upon a sense of belonging within a community (Al-Shammari, 2021).

Preserving intangible heritage of Sarawak

Intangible heritage encompasses cultural practices, traditions, and knowledge that are transmitted from one generation to the next. This category includes elements such as music, dance, oral storytelling, and traditional craftsmanship. These intangible components play a vital role in our collective cultural heritage, contributing to the formation of our identity and fostering a sense of community.

Preserving Sarawak's oral traditions has an intrinsic educational value as it provides a living history lesson, enabling younger generations to understand the struggles, triumphs, and resilience of their forebears. These narratives are not static; they evolve over time, adapting to new contexts while retaining their core values (Lenzerini, 2011). Thus, they offer a dynamic perspective on the past and a roadmap for navigating the challenges of the present and future.

In this context, oral traditions become a critical repository of the pre-colonial heritage and a bridge to the authentic cultural essence of Sarawak. These traditions serve as a counterbalance to the disruptive influences of colonialism, allowing the younger generation to reconnect with their roots (Patil, 2021). In many colonised regions, like Sarawak, the imposition of colonial rule often resulted in the erosion of indigenous cultures, languages, and traditions. Nonetheless, traditional customs persisted, providing indigenous communities with a sense of continuity and belonging. They offer

an unfiltered glimpse into the beliefs, values, and customs that were integral to the Sarawakian way of life long before the arrival of the colonisers. Moreover, Lenzerini (2011) presented a thought-provoking perspective during a UNESCO gathering in Tokyo in August 2004. At this gathering, *The Minister of Culture, Education, Science, and the Church of Greenland* articulated the view that globalisation shares parallels with another form of colonisation. This assertion underscores the profound alterations inflicted upon the foundation of cultural heritage, resonating with the enduring ramifications of colonialism. Therefore, the act of preserving these oral traditions fosters a sense of belonging and community among Sarawakians. It instils pride in one's cultural heritage and identity, reinforcing the notion that Sarawak is not just a geographical region, but a living tapestry of stories, experiences, and wisdom passed down through generations.

The current researchers identified an apparent knowledge gap in the previous studies concerning oral tradition and the Kenyah ethnic. Early Sarawak cultural studies have focused on exploring and disseminating knowledge on Sarawak tangible cultural heritages, rather than intangible ones, such as traditional dance (Albattat et al., 2016; Jong, 2022), traditional food (Mohd Shazali Md Sharif et al., 2020), and traditional costume (Wan Juliana Emeih Wahid & Pital, 2018; Kiyai & Tugang, 2021). Prior studies heavily touched on the largest indigenous group in Sarawak, which is the Iban (Albattat et al., 2016; Wan Juliana Emeih Wahid & Pital, 2018; Nik Mohd Shahril Nik Mohd Nor et al., 2020; Kiyai & Tugang, 2021), and they did not address the intangible heritage of other minority indigenous groups. Julia (2016) also brought attention to the concern that children, teenagers and university students would prefer popular art rather than traditional or local art which seems to be gradually fading as popular art has influenced all parts of their life in many ways.

It is unfortunate that there is a lack of research on minority ethnic groups like the Kenyah in Sarawak. This gap in research highlights the necessity of investigating Sarawak's intangible cultural heritage, particularly the oral traditions of minority groups like the Kenyah. By focusing on the younger generations' familiarity with the Kenyah minority's oral tradition of Ngebuyan, this study aims to fill these crucial gaps and contribute to a comprehensive understanding of cultural awareness and preservation strategies within Sarawak's diverse ethnic communities.

In conclusion, preserving Sarawak's oral tradition for a better understanding of the region's unique cultural identity offers an insight into the beliefs, values and customs that have shaped the Sarawakian way of life. It is a means of reclaiming and revitalising the cultural identity that has been shaped and reshaped by historical forces. By safeguarding these traditions, we ensure that the legacy of Sarawak's indigenous communities endures, serving as a source of inspiration, knowledge, and unity for generations to come.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-method approach where it involved a descriptive qualitative method to explain the data, while quantitative method is used as an additional method to present the data in the form of numbers and percentages.

A total of 109 undergraduate students of UiTM Sarawak Branch, Malaysia from three different campuses; Samarahan Campus 1, Samarahan Campus 2, and Mukah Campus participated in this study. The focal point of this study was the Bumiputera demographic, a composite group encompassing a myriad of indigenous ethnic origins,

distinct from the dominant Malay, Chinese, and Indian populations within Malaysia. The methodological framework of this study thoughtfully incorporated both convenience and snowball samplings.

An online questionnaire using Google Form was used with a combination of open-ended and closed-ended questions. There were ten (10) close-ended questions that required students to answer their demographic background and their perceptions on Sarawak oral traditions. All researchers distributed the questionnaire to selected groups and collected the data.

Findings and Discussion

Demographic data

Overall, a total of 109 students answered the questionnaire. The first four questions were related to students' demographic information. A demographic profile of the sample is tabulated in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Demographic Data

		N	%
Gender	Male	34	31.2%
	Female	75	68.8%
Ethnicity	Bidayuh	8	7.3%
	Iban	25	22.9%
	Jawa	1	0.9%
	Kedayan	3	2.8%
	Kelabit	3	2.8%
	Kenyah	5	4.6%
	Melanau	11	10.1%
	Melayu	51	46.8%
	Rungus	1	0.9%
	Suluk	1	0.9%

Here, it is apparent that 68.8% of the respondents identified as female students, whilst 34% are male students. The demographic data reveals a significant level of ethnic heterogeneity among the individuals involved. It was also observed that 51 identified themselves as being of Malay ethnicity. On the other hand, a total of 25 participants self-identified as Iban. The representation of pupils from many ethnic origins was limited, with no more than 11 individuals in each group. In particular, the student population consisted of eight individuals with *Bidayuh* lineage, five individuals of *Kenyah* origin, and three individuals each with *Kedayan* and *Kelabit* descent. The survey had a limited number of respondents from *Rungus*, *Suluk*, and *Jawa* origins, with only one participant representing each of these nationalities.

The data unequivocally highlights that *Kenyah* respondents are in the minority within the sample. This observation underscores the importance of preserving their distinct culture and traditions, as they constitute a minority group with unique cultural characteristics that warrant safeguarding.

Level of familiarity towards oral traditions among younger generations

To assess the familiarity of younger generations with oral traditions, the first questionnaire item, "I am familiar with oral traditions," was included. The responses revealed that a significant 86.2% of the participants indicated their knowledge of oral traditions, while only 13.8% admitted to being unaware of them (refer to Table 2).

Table 2. Questionnaire Item 1.

I am familiar with oral traditions.		
	N	%
Strongly Agree	13	11.9%
Agree	47	43.1%
Neutral	34	31.2%
Disagree	11	10.1%
Strongly Disagree	4	3.7%

This indicates a substantial level of familiarity among younger generations about oral traditions. Over the years, these individuals have been raised in an environment that actively encourages the immersion of each culture into their daily lives. This may explain why the respondents exhibit a strong understanding of their ethnicity, including the oral traditions associated with their culture. Nevertheless, whether these younger generations actively engage in or uphold these traditions in their daily lives remains an open question.

Remarkably, the outcome of the analysis contradicts the findings of Albattat et al. (2016), where they did a research on students' awareness towards traditional dances in Sarawak and distributed questionnaires to university students. Finding showed that the university students possessed limited awareness of Sarawak traditional dances and Sarawak ethnic cultures. Also, this finding also differs from Banseng and Sandai (2017) where they found out that younger generations' attention and emphasis on oral traditions are lacking due to the advancement in technology. The discrepancy between the current analysis and findings from Albattat et. al. (2016) and Banseng and Sandai (2017) can be attributed to two primary factors, both internal and external in nature. Traditionally, the acquisition of fundamental knowledge about cultural traditions followed a linear trajectory, with information passed down from older generations to younger ones, primarily through oral means within households. However, this traditional method has evolved over time, particularly with the advent of the digital era.

Degree of awareness and engagement in oral traditions among younger generations

Based on the findings presented in Table 3, it appears that there is an acknowledgment of oral tradition within the cultural context of the respondents. A noteworthy 24.8% of the participants express a strong agreement with the existence of oral traditions in their culture, indicating a robust awareness of this aspect of their cultural heritage. Additionally, the majority, constituting 42.2%, hold a positive stance, agreeing with the presence of oral traditions. This suggests that a significant proportion of respondents consider oral traditions as integral components of their cultural identity.

Table 3. Questionnaire Item 2

There is an oral tradition in my culture.		
	N	%
Strongly Agree	27	24.8%
Agree	46	42.2%
Neutral	24	22.0%
Disagree	6	5.5%
Strongly Disagree	6	5.5%

The remaining 33% of the respondents were either neutral, disagreed, or strongly disagreed. Interestingly, 5.5% of respondents strongly disagree with the statement. This is consistent with the small percentage of the respondents who claimed they were unaware of the existence of oral traditions. It is possible that these respondents are not familiar with the concept of oral traditions, or they may believe that oral traditions are no longer relevant in today's world because of the process of globalisation. As reported by Julia (2016), due to the significant impact that globalisation has had on society, the younger generation has developed a preference for popular art over traditional art, which has caused them to lose appreciation for the latter.

In summary, the data presented in Table 3 suggests that a substantial portion of respondents recognise the presence of oral traditions in their culture, with the majority either in agreement or strong agreement with the statement. Nonetheless, a significant segment remains neutral, implying the necessity for further investigation or clarification of their awareness regarding cultural oral traditions. Additionally, a minority of respondents disagree or strongly disagree, indicating a potential lack of awareness or understanding of their cultural heritage.

On the other hand, Table 4 examines respondents' attitudes toward practising their culture's oral tradition, this analysis delves into the extent of engagement among younger generations in their respective cultural traditions.

Table 4. Questionnaire Item 3

I practise the oral tradition of my culture.		
	N	%
Agree	29	26.6%
Strongly Agree	7	6.4%
Neutral	43	39.4%
Disagree	19	17.4%
Strongly Disagree	11	10.1%

Notably, approximately 26.6% of respondents expressed agreement with practising the oral tradition of their culture, signifying a willingness and active participation in preserving their cultural heritage through oral traditions. Furthermore, a smaller yet significant percentage, around 6.4%, strongly affirmed their commitment to practising their culture's oral tradition, demonstrating a profound dedication to and active involvement in their cultural heritage.

Surprisingly, the largest proportion of respondents, approximately 39.4%, remained neutral regarding the practice of their culture's oral tradition. This neutrality suggests that a substantial segment of participants neither actively engage in nor reject their cultural oral traditions. It may indicate a need for further exploration or a lack of awareness among this group.

A noteworthy 27.5% of respondents expressed disagreement with practising their culture's oral tradition, signifying a conscious detachment from this aspect of their cultural heritage. Additionally, a significant percentage disagreed or strongly disagreed with practising these traditions, indicating a disconnection from or lack of interest in the oral aspects of their cultural heritage.

Younger generations' interest in exploring and grasping Sarawak's ethnic minority oral traditions

A comprehensive analysis of the data presented in Table 5 reveals that a substantial proportion of the surveyed respondents, specifically 76 individuals, which represents a significant 69.7% of the total, have expressed a keen interest in exploring the oral traditions of Sarawak's ethnic minorities. This statistic, which demonstrates a strong interest in exploring and comprehending these ancestral customs, is a significant finding of this investigation. It suggests that the younger generations are willing to actively partake in the preservation and appreciation of these traditions.

Table 5. Questionnaire Item 4

I am interested in discovering and understanding the oral traditions of Sarawak's ethnic minorities.		
	N	%
Strongly Agree	30	27.5%
Agree	46	42.2%
Neutral	26	23.9%
Disagree	4	3.7%
Strongly Disagree	3	2.8%

However, it is also important to note that a small percentage of respondents, specifically seven people, or 6.5% of the total participants, have expressed a contrary opinion. This minor but significant percentage has expressed disinterest in acquiring the oral traditions of Sarawak's ethnic minorities.

In summary, the data gleaned from the survey underscores a significant level of interest among the respondents, representing the younger generations, in discovering and comprehending the oral traditions of Sarawak's ethnic minorities. This prevailing curiosity and receptiveness to these traditions are indicative of a positive outlook on cultural preservation and heritage appreciation within this demographic. Nonetheless, the study reveals the existence of a minority that remains uninterested in this cultural exploration, necessitating additional research to determine the factors contributing to their perspective.

Younger Generations' Acquaintance with *Ngebuyan* Oral Tradition

Expanding on the findings from Table 6, a significant portion of the respondents, specifically 57.8%, indicated that they had no prior knowledge of the *Ngebuyan* oral tradition. Conversely, 42.2% of the respondents acknowledged their awareness of *Ngebuyan*. These results directly align with the fourth research question posed in this study which seeks to assess the extent of respondents' familiarity with *Ngebuyan*. Evidently, it can be concluded that most of the sampled population, comprising over half, had not been previously exposed to or informed about the existence of the *Ngebuyan* oral tradition.

Table 6. Questionnaire Item 5

I've heard about Ngebuyan (an oral tradition of the Kenyah people).		
	N	%
Strongly Agree	5	4.6%
Agree	13	11.9%
Neutral	28	25.7%
Disagree	32	29.4%
Strongly Disagree	31	28.4%

This finding underscores a substantial gap in knowledge pertaining to *Ngebuyan* among the younger generation, emphasising the critical need for educational initiatives and conservation efforts aimed at educating and advocating for this cultural legacy among the younger generation. It highlights the importance of documenting and transmitting such oral traditions to ensure their continued existence and relevance in the cultural tapestry of Sarawak, especially among the minority ethnic groups.

Conclusion

Despite the small sample size, which stands as one of the limitations of the current study, it nonetheless facilitated a deeper comprehension of the extent of awareness among Sarawak Bumiputera students regarding oral tradition. A larger sample size would have bolstered the statistical robustness of the findings, enhancing the reliability and validity of the study's conclusions. It would have allowed for more sophisticated quantitative analyses and increased the confidence in the generalizability of the results beyond the study's immediate context. Despite this limitation, the study has contributed to a deeper comprehension of the extent of awareness among Bumiputera youths regarding oral traditions.

The younger generation may face difficulties in accessing traditional narratives and cultural knowledge, which can hinder the safeguarding of oral traditions. The constant changes in time and space pose challenges to maintaining and preserving cultural elements, making it essential for individuals to possess literacy and awareness to uphold their cultural identity. This research emphasises the need for future scholars to protect the oral traditions of minority ethnic communities. Such an effort holds promise in offering upcoming generations the chance to engage with the historical and cultural aspects of the region through traditional expressions like music, dance, and storytelling. Ultimately, the preservation of cultural traditions holds the potential to invigorate local economies and create job opportunities within the tourism and related industries.

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