Blame It on My Parents! - Parental Heritage Influence on Iban Popular Music Consumption and Ethnic Identity Among Iban Youths in Malaysia

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***Abstract*:** The Iban is an indigenous group living in the Malaysian state of Sarawak, located on Borneo Kalimantan. The study examined ethnic identity and consumption of Iban pop songs by investigating the influence of half- or full-Iban parentage on knowledge, attitudes and practices of listening to Iban pop songs. Questionnaire data were collected from 189 Iban participants (21.16% half-Iban; 78.84% full-Iban). The favourite genre of Iban pop songs is ballads but 74.6% of the participants could sing the iconic Iban rock song, *Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis*. A majority of the Iban participants listened to Iban pop songs on YouTube channels although a fair number still used the radio and mobile phones. The participants believed that Iban songs can unite the Iban and represent the Sarawakian identity. The male participants were more familiar with Iban pop songs than the female participants. Consumption of Iban music does not differ significantly with monthly income and education level. The results showed that full-Iban participants are more interested in, knowledgeable about, and positive about Iban pop songs, compared to half-Iban participants. The full-Iban participants felt strongly that Iban songs can represent the Malaysian identity, and modern Iban culture and attain the international standard. The findings suggest that Iban parents shape their children's interest in Iban popular music by inculcating a strong Iban ethnic identity.

Keywords: Iban, ethnic identity, indigenous, knowledge-attitude-practices (KAP), Malaysia, pop songs.

Music and identities are in a reciprocal relationship. Music is a "constitutive part of the culture and hence is important for individual and social identity formation", and musicking binds members to share social identities such as ethnic identity and national identity (Lidskog, 2017, p. 25). Collective experiences are told through songs, like songs written to record the development efforts of the government in developing countries (Lim, 2019). Over time, as the songs are sung, the collective experiences are transferred to younger generations and this contributes to the maintenance of a historical consciousness for the groups, and the songs are an expression of their cultural identity (Roberson, 2010). As such, music is not only a means for the expression of identities but also facilitates the reproduction and transformation of identities (Lidskog, 2017).

Before embarking on a discussion of songs and identity formation, two layers of social identities, national identity, and ethnic identity, need to be broached. National identity refers to "a specific kind of collective feeling, i.e., a self-image or an understanding" shared by citizens of a nation" (Marschelke, 2021, p. 8). On the other hand, a strong ethnic identity means that

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individuals "evaluate their [ethnic] group positively, prefer or are comfortable with their group membership, are interested in, knowledgeable about, and committed to the group, and are involved in ethnic practices" (Phinney, 1991, p. 194). In the study of social identities in multiethnic societies, ethnic identity, and national identity are often oppositional identities. For example, in Malaysia, strong ethnic identities are often viewed as an obstacle to achieving the unity of diverse groups (Nordin et al., 2018; Rahim, 2018).

Through the ages, songs have been used as a tool to foster a national identity. Examples of songs that cultivate a common identity and connectedness among people of a nation are *Maimoatia* (meaning 'Cherish it') from New Zealand (Haunui-Thompson, 2016) and "Where the Stars and Stripes and the Eagles Fly" from the United States (McFadgen, 2014). The latter is a song in the country music genre sung by Aaron Tippin, who wrote it with Kenny Beard and Casey Beathard. In the context of Malaysia, popular music that carries messages of unity are "31 Ogos" ("31 August", the independence day of Malaysia) by the late Sudirman Haji Arshad, and 'Standing in the Eyes of the World' by Ella (Adil & Shazlin, 2019). Conversely, a song that heightens indigenous identity is *Ini tanah kita* (This is our land) by Atama Katama about the land rights of the Sabah people in Malaysia (Tang, 2016). Sabah is the other Malaysian state located on Borneo Kalimantan Island, north of Sarawak.

It seems that some popular songs can also foster both layers of social identities, although they may be written for entertainment. For instance, Jerome, Ting, and Perry (2022) found that *Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis,* a popular Iban song in Malaysia, carries messages of unity and a sense of belonging, and its appeal extends beyond that of the indigenous group. People living in Sarawak who are not Iban can identify with the song *Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis* (meaning 'to have one's legs shaved') and it evokes the shared identity of belonging to the same state (Mohamad Said et al., 2021). *Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis* is a love song but the pop song has been played so frequently in social events attended by people of different ethnic groups that they can join in to sing the chorus. Several studies (Jerome, Perry, & Ting, 2022; Mohamad Said et al., 2021) have established that *Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis* constructs a state identity (being Sarawakian) rather than a national identity (being Malaysian) for Iban and non-Iban people. The state identity is particularly strong in Sarawak state, as indicated by the ISEAS Borneo Survey, which found that 63% of respondents identified themselves as Sarawakian first and Malaysian second (Lee, 2018). In the case of *Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis*, a pop song written originally for entertainment, became a resource for constructing new ethnic and state identities. Music not only "expresses and maintains pre-existing identities, but it also provides resources for contesting and negotiating identities and constructing new ones" (Lidskog, 2017, p. 25).

Most studies show that peer influence shapes listeners' knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions towards songs they consume and songs that become a source of their identity construction (from personal identity to social/group identity) (Boyle et al., 1981; Clarke, 1973; Minks, 1999; Nuttall & Tinson, 2005). However, parental influence in shaping children's music consumption is less known. Lee and Ting (2016) found an association between familial socialization and strong ethnic identity among the Chinese in Malaysia in their study on parents' primary school choice. Parents influence the children's sense of belonging to an ethnic group. Parental socialization involves the intergenerational transmission of information about the history, customs, and traditions of the ethnic group, as well as attitudes and values about the ethnic group, which includes not only ethnic pride but also awareness of discrimination, intergroup mistrust (Hughes et al., 2006). Children who grow up in families where both parents are from the same ethnic group are likely to develop a stronger ethnic identity. They are more entrenched in the language, traditions, cultural practices, and values of the ethnic group. They would likely be more interested in and knowledgeable about the literature and music of the ethnic group as this is part of the familial socialization into the culture of the ethnic group. However, in addition to parental ethnic socialization, for Malaysians of Chinese descent in

Malaysia, Chinese-medium schools play a strong role in socializing children into the Chinese culture (Lee & Ting, 2016). For the Bidayuh (a small indigenous group living in Sarawak, Malaysia), the sense of belonging to their ethnic group is heightened by the shared use of their ethnic language, a celebration of the Gawai harvest festival, and Bidayuh parentage (Ting & Campbell, 2013). However, similar findings are not available on the Iban. Ethnic identity in Sarawak has been studied mostly concerning language choice (e.g., Dealwis, 2008; Musa & Ting, 2015; Naji & David, 2003). Our literature search showed that researchers have not investigated whether ethnic music consumption and the strength of ethnic identity are associated, and this connection (if any) is little understood. We posit that people with stronger ethnic identities have different practices and attitudes in the consumption of indigenous music compared to people whose ethnic identity is not as strong.

The study examined ethnic identity and consumption of Iban pop songs by investigating the influence of half- or full-Iban parentage on knowledge, attitudes, and practices of listening to Iban pop songs. In this study, Iban parentage is used as a proxy for the strength of ethnic identity because of the pertinent role of parents in ethnic socialization.

Background on Iban pop songs in Sarawak, Malaysia

The Iban People

The Iban is an indigenous group living in the Malaysian state of Sarawak, located on Borneo Kalimantan. Here some background on the multi-ethnic setting of Sarawak is described to show why mixed-parentage is a factor that may influence ethnic socialization by parents. Mixed marriages are common in Sarawak and strengthen unity and relationships across ethnic groups because the couple and their wider families learn to appreciate ethnic diversity. The Chief Minister of Sarawak was quoted as saying, "A Chinese marrying a Malay, a Malay marrying a Chinese, a Chinese marrying a Dayak, an Iban marrying a Bidayuh and many more inter-racial marriages are common in Sarawak" (Bernama, 2019, para. 3). The term Dayak refers to two indigenous groups, the Iban and Bidayuh. The common occurrence of mixed marriages in Sarawak has led to an amendment of a law on the ethnic status of children from mixed marriages between a native of Sarawak and a non-native person. The Interpretation (Amendment) Bill 2022 was passed in the state legislative assembly sitting on 14 December 2022 and came into force on 11 February 2023 (Chandra, 2022). With this, native status is accorded to Sarawakian children of mixed marriages as long as one of the parents is from an indigenous community, and this enables the children to inherit and buy native land. In Sarawak, the land is categorized into native land and mixed-zone land (which non-indigenous Sarawakians can buy and sell).

Among the indigenous groups, the Iban is the largest group in Sarawak with a population of 723,400 out of the state population of 2.813 million in 2022; population statistics for the other ethnic groups are as follows: Chinese (619,900), Malay (607,800), Bidayuh (197,000), Melanau (133,400), Other Indigenous (141,200) (Economic Planning Unit, Sarawak, 2022). Scholarly writing has focussed on several Iban identity markers. A prominent tangible sign of the Iban identity was tattoos but now only elders in longhouses have tattoos with Iban motifs (Pawanteh et al., 2021). The Iban longhouse is also a distinctive identity marker, and it is different from the traditional houses of other Sarawak indigenous groups. The Iban longhouse looks like a long row of terraced wooden houses built on stilts and they share a long verandah, where the people congregate and socialize with one another (Beynon, 2013; Zeppel, 1994). A distinctive cultural practice of the Iban is *Bejalai* (journeying), derived from their migratory urge to travel, such as searching for new land to settle in (Yapp & Abas, 2013).

Other studies on the Iban identity are on Iban people living in the nearby countries of Indonesia (Eilenberg, 2005; Wadley & Eilenberg, 2005).

Iban Songs

Iban popular songs have been popularised by Radio Televisyen Malaysia (RTM) since the national radio station was first established in 1954 (Lim, 2019). Iban popular songs were played in the one-hour slot allocated to the Iban radio programme broadcasted from 7 p.m. to 8 p.m. daily on Iban folklore, poem declamation, agriculture, and Indonesian, Indian, British and American pop music (Lim et al., 2016).

The beginning of the Iban popular music can be traced to RTM engaging two Iban sisters (Seniorita and Pauline Linang) and the Bayang family (Esther and Vida) to record Iban songs, (Lim, 2019). As the song writers-cum-singers were urban Ibans, the songs of the Linang sisters appealed to the young upper-class Ibans living in urban areas (Lim, 2019). Interestingly, while these songs were written for entertainment, they were also used for nation-building. Lim (2019) wrote about how a popular Iban song became a battle cry of sorts. In the 1960s, winners of the RTM star competition like Christopher Kelly popularised *Agi Idup Agi Ngelaban* (meaning fight to the death). Created to encourage Iban soldiers during the communist insurgency, this song is now used as a battle cry during occasions like election campaigns. The domination of Iban airwaves since the establishment of RTM by music from other countries resulted in Iban artists incorporating these tunes and rhythms into the Iban songs they wrote. For example, the melody of "*Nganti Ti Pulai*" (meaning Waiting for you to come back) is taken from "Sealed with a Kiss" sung by Brian Hyland. "*Nganti Ti Pulai*" was sung by Senorita Linang and dedicated to the Iban soldiers who were posted to the then Malaya to fight the communists. The communist insurgency in Malaysia lasted from 1968 to 1989.

Iban Music Industry

Iban music became commercialised in the 1970s as more songs were written for entertainment. The subject of Iban popular songs is the unpredictability of emotions (Postill, 2006). Themes on development, sacrifice and government propaganda seem to be a thing of the past. An Iban politician, Christopher Gira Sambang, noted that the genre of Iban songs has expanded from the rhythm of *joget* and *keroncong* to ballads, rock songs or even slow rock songs (Abdullah, 2022). Joget is a lively traditional Malay dance influenced by the Portuguese dance of Branyo, and ends in "a final passage where the beat quickens, and the dancers skip heel-toe from one leg to the other like dancing cockerels" (Educalingo, 2022, para. 1). Similarly, the *keroncong* also has Portuguese influence. The *keroncong* is a Portuguese-cum-Indonesian musical style consisting of an orchestra and a vocalist and is considered the music of old people (Keronconginsolo, 2022). On the other hand, a ballad is "a type of song which is slow, has a dramatic melody, and tells a story. The lyrics are often about love, loss, or heroism. Ballads usually have a few verses that repeat throughout the song to help keep the song's theme clear in your head" (Hughes, 2022, para. 1). In direct contrast to ballads, rock music is a music style with a strong beat usually sung to the accompaniment of guitar and drums (Hawkes, 2022). To add to these music genres, many popular Iban songs are in the *dangdut* genre. *Dangdut* is a folk music genre that derived its name from the sound made by the Indian *tabla* (pair of single-headed drums), which made the dang-dut sound; it is influenced by Hindustani, Arabic and Malay music and is characterized by melodious instrumentation and vocals (Britannica, n.d.).

In recent times, the growth of the Iban music industry has hit a snag. Indigenous singers lament the scourge of music piracy which deprive singers of royalty of the sales of albums, and nowadays, recording companies prefer singers to record single tracks, which is cheaper (The

Borneo Post, 2019). A music composer, Isa Lee, is of the view that research is needed for Iban songs to have a global standard, and, to him, the key is for the Iban songs to go beyond entertaining or captivating the listeners' mood to giving inspiration to people (The Borneo Post, 2015). The situation begs the question of the consumption of Iban popular music among the Iban people of Sarawak and whether familial socialization into the Iban identity is linked to greater consumption of Iban popular songs.

Method of Study

The descriptive study on knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions of Iban songs involved 189 Iban participants with Iban parentage. In the study, 200 questionnaires were returned after the data were cleaned, and 11 participants were excluded because they were not of Iban parentage. This left 189 participants, of which 21.16% had one parent who was Iban and 78.84% had both parents who were Iban. Table 1 shows that there were slightly more female participants (56.08%) than male participants (43.92%). Most of the participants (81.48%) had at least a Form 6 or Diploma education. There was a spread of socio-economic backgrounds among the participants, as shown by their monthly income. Nearly half (48.15%) of the participants were not working and 40.21% were students. Three-quarters (74.6%) of the participants lived in urban areas, while the rest were in rural areas of Sarawak, an East Malaysian state located on Kalimantan Borneo.

Table 1
Demographic Information of Participants (N=189)

Demographic characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Iban parentage	One parent is Iban	40	21.16
	Both parents are Iban	149	78.84
Gender	Female	106	56.08
	Male	83	43.92
Education	Primary 6 or lower	3	1.59
	Form 3	3	1.59
	Form 5	29	15.34
	Form 6 and Diploma	68	35.98
	Degree	61	32.28
	Postgraduate degree	25	13.23
Work status	Student	76	40.21
	Not employed	9	4.76
	Working	104	55.03
Monthly income	Not working	91	48.15
	Less than RM2000	15	7.94
	RM2000-RM3999	34	17.99
	RM4000-RM5999	17	8.99
	RM6000-RM7999	15	7.94
	RM8000-RM9999	6	3.17
	RM10000 and above	11	5.82
Residence	Rural	48	25.40
	Urban	141	74.60
Religion	Christian	178	94.18
	Muslim	7	3.70
	Others	4	2.12

The 39-item questionnaire was self-constructed based on the Knowledge-Attitudes-Practices (KAPS) framework because there were no questionnaires on behaviors, and attitudes towards indigenous songs at the time of the study. The questionnaire included knowledge of Iban pop songs (10 items), favorite genre of Iban pop songs (1 item), the means used to listen to Iban songs (1 item), and people who introduce Iban songs to them (6 items). Attitudes to Iban songs focused on reasons for listening to Iban songs (9 items), perceptions of Iban songs (7 items), and affective attitudes (5 items). The 10 Iban pop songs were selected to cover a range of songs from 2008 (*Kini Ka Nuan Pegi* by Michael Jemat) to 2022 (*Redak Seribu* by Masterpiece) (see "Redak Seribu," n.d.). The songs also included several genres like rock, ballad, and dangdut. Songs ranged from very popular songs like *Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis* to less popular ones to find out how much Iban people knew about songs in their ethnic language. The questionnaire also elicited the participants' demographic information. The first part of the questionnaire provided information on the study, voluntary participation, and confidentiality and anonymity of responses.

An online questionnaire was distributed via the snowball sampling technique to reach a larger number of Iban participants than is otherwise possible using the researchers' social contacts in the Iban community. The researchers sent the link to their contacts via Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. They were asked to forward the link to their Iban family, friends, and colleagues. The dissemination of the questionnaire link was mostly through social media to Iban people living in both rural and urban areas of Sarawak, although emails and telephone calls were also used to reach more participants. Participants who were willing to fill in the questionnaire indicated their consent before proceeding to the questionnaire proper. As the subject matter was not controversial and did not involve sensitive information, ethics approval was deemed unnecessary.

For the data analysis, the questionnaire data in the Excel sheet were analyzed. Full Iban parentage was taken to mean a strong ethnic identity, while half-Iban parentage was taken to mean a weaker ethnic identity. The participants' self-reports of Iban identity matched 100% with information on whether one or both parents were Iban, showing that the Iban participants defined their identity based on parentage. To analyze the data, frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were computed. In addition, t-tests were run to find out if there were significant differences in the participants' knowledge, attitudes, and practices of Iban songs based on gender and Iban parentage. In addition, correlation tests were run to find the influence of education level and monthly income on Iban popular music consumption.
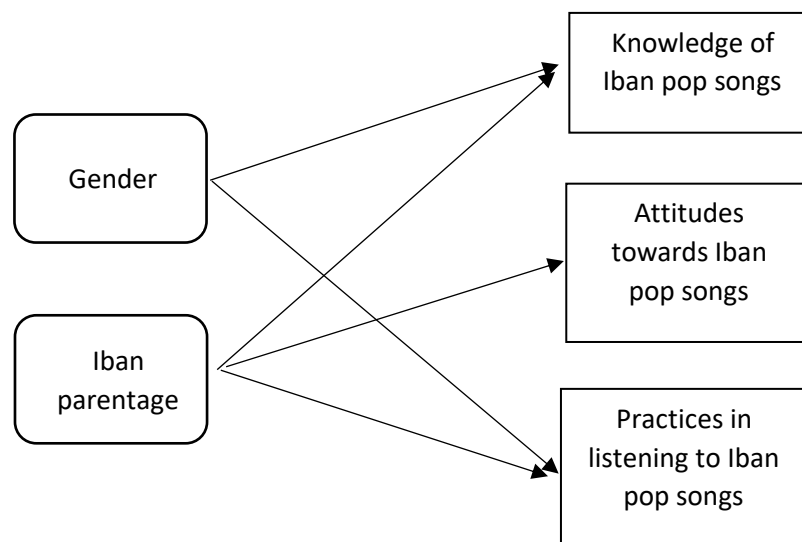
Results

In this section, the descriptive results of the Iban participants' knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions of Iban pop songs are presented. In each section, results of inferential statistical tests are presented to show the significance of differences according to gender, socio-economic status, and Iban parentage of participants (indicative of strong ethnic identity), summarized in Figure 1.

The results showed no significant differences in female and male Iban participants' knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions of Iban pop songs (t-tests). There were also no significant relationships between the Iban participants' knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions of Iban pop songs and their education level and monthly income (Pearson correlation) at a 95% confidence level. Therefore, these non-significant results are not reported later.

Figure 1

Model Showing the Influence of Gender and Iban Parentage on Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practices of Iban Pop Songs

Iban Participants' Knowledge of Iban Pop Songs

The titles of 10 Iban pop songs were presented to participants. The results showed that all the participants listened to Iban songs but their familiarity with the songs varied (Table 2). The most familiar song is *Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis* by Andrewson Ngalai, which tells the story of a man who would do whatever it takes to marry the woman he loves (Borneo Talk, 2020). Only one out of 189 participants did not know the song, while 74.6% knew the lyrics and how to sing the song. Another 21.16% knew how to sing the song a little, and 3.7% knew some lyrics. The song is sung during events, such as weddings, dinner parties, and Gawai (harvest) celebrations. Guests usually join in the singing and interject it with "*satu, dua, taruh; taruh, taruh, ooooha*", which is translated as "one, two, put/place (repeated three times)". *Ooooha* is not a word; it is just a sound to end the chorus.

The second most familiar song was *Redak Seribu* by Masterpiece, where a man talks about his broken heart when his girlfriend left him for another man ("Lyrics and translation: *Redak Seribu*," 2022). As many as 61.38% of the Iban participants could sing the full song, and another 25.4% could sing a little of the song. The participants' knowledge of the other Iban pop songs was less (21.16%-43.39%). The song which is the least known to the participants was *Kini Ka Nuan Pegi* by Michael Jemat, released in 2008, probably because it is an old song and the singer had passed away. *Kini Ka Nuan Pegi* uses the same tune as the Chinese song "Wo ai de ni, ni zai na li ya, zai na li" (I love you, where are you, where are you) sung by Teresa Teng, a Taiwanese singer (1953-1995). The meaning of *Kini Ka Nuan Pegi* is also similar to the Chinese song, and therefore this song is "not really" an Iban song in that sense. The so-called Chinese origin of *Kini Ka Nuan Pegi* could make it less popular among the Iban participants, besides the age of the song.

Two-tailed t-tests showed that there is a significant gender difference in the knowledge of Songs 3 and 10, that is, *Patah ke lidi* (Old saying meaning "burn bridges") by Dom Romeo and *Kini ka nuan pegi* (Where are you going?) by Michael Jemat. Based on the mean scores, the males knew Dom Romeo's song M=3.36, SD=0.9) a lot more than the females (M=2.85, SD=1.05). The mean scores showed that the males knew how to sing Michael Jemat's song a

little (M=2.57, SD=1.01) more than the females, who only knew a few words of the lyrics (M=2.23, SD=1.15).

Interestingly, there were significant differences in the knowledge of half- and full-Iban participants on six songs at p<.05 (Songs 3, 4, 5, 6, 9, and 10). Based on the mean scores shown in Table 3, the full-Iban participants knew these songs better and could sing them better than the half-Iban participants. These songs were *Patah ke Lidi*, *Tesat Madang Bungai*, *Beperang Dalam Petang*, *Nubai*, *Semampai Laku* and *Kini Ka Nuan Pegi*.

Table 2

Iban Participants' Knowledge of Iban Pop Songs (N=189)

	Genre	Do not know the song		Know a little of the lyrics		Know how to sing the song a little		Know lyrics and how to sing the song	
		Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
1. Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis – Andrewson Ngalai	Rock	1	0.53	7	3.70	40	21.16	141	74.60
2. Redak Seribu – Masterpiece	Rock	4	2.12	21	11.11	48	25.40	116	61.38
3. Patah ke Lidi – Dom Romeo[G]	Ballad	23	12.17	22	11.64	62	32.80	82	43.39
4. Tesat Madang Bungai – Sima	Dangdut	26	13.76	37	19.58	45	23.81	81	42.86
5. Beperang Dalam Petang – Winnie Albert	Rock	20	10.58	39	20.63	50	26.46	80	42.33
6. Nubai - Josephenie Jalin	Dangdut	25	13.23	27	14.29	68	35.98	69	36.51
7. Joget to the Moon – Peter John	Joget	42	22.22	44	23.28	39	20.63	64	33.86
8. Bajik – Hevance	Pop song	39	20.63	36	19.05	52	27.51	62	32.80
9. Semampai Laku – Duna	Dangdut	37	19.58	39	20.63	58	30.69	55	29.10
10. Kini Ka Nuan Pegi – Michael Jemat[G]	(Chinese song rhythm)	52	27.51	54	28.57	43	22.75	40	21.16

Note. [G] Significant gender difference at p<.05 (Songs 3 and 10); [P] Significant difference for half- and full-Iban participants at p<.05 (Songs 3, 4, 5, and 10)

Table 3

Songs for Which There are Significant Gender Differences in Knowledge of the Song (N=189)

Number	Genre	Song Title and Singer	Half Iban		Full Iban	
			Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Song 3	Ballad	Patah ke lidi – Dom Romeo	2.68	1.12	3.18	0.97
Song 4	Dangdut	Tesat Madang Bungai – Sima	2.50	1.15	3.08	1.04
Song 5	Rock	Berperang Dalam Petang – Winnie Albert	2.45	1.06	3.15	0.97
Song 6	Dangdut	Nubai - Josephenie Jalin	2.48	0.96	3.09	1.00
Song 9	Dangdut	Semampai Laku – Duna	2.23	1.17	2.82	1.04
Song 10	Chinese	Kini ka nuan pegi – Michael Jemat	1.90	1.01	2.50	1.09

There is no significant correlation between socio-economic background and knowledge of Iban songs at p<.05. Socio-economic background was determined using the Iban participants' education level and monthly income. The non-significant correlation results indicated that the knowledge of Iban songs among the Iban participants is similar regardless of socio-economic background. Four particular Iban songs that can transcend gender, socio-economic background, and Iban parentage differences are *Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis*, along with Song 2 (*Redak Seribu* by Masterpiece), Song 7 (*Joget To The Moon* by Peter John), and Song 8 (*Bajik* by Hevance). As these three songs have widespread appeal, more information is provided on these songs. Firstly, *Redak Seribu* is a rock ballad with a tune that is similar to a Malay rock ballad, and the popularity of the song could be because Masterpiece is a popular Iban rock band. Next, *Joget to the Moon* by Peter John is an oldie that shares similarities with the *joget/mejeng* style of *Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis*. This genre is famous among Ibans of all ages because it is a staple song for Gawai and other "*keramaian*" (celebrations). Lastly, *Bajik* is a song sung by Hevance, an Iban alternative/modern/indie rock band. The song has the typical rock tune combined with other musical styles, such as rap, which a lot of young music listeners today can identify with. Bajik is an Iban word, an adjective used to describe a beautiful woman. These three songs are very popular among Iban listeners (youth, in particular) because of the singer/performer and the genre.

Iban Participants' Attitudes Towards Iban Pop Songs

Table 4 shows that the most widely held beliefs are that Iban songs can unite the Iban group (M=4.19, SD=0.83) and that Iban songs can represent the identity of Sarawakians (M=4.19, SD=0.81). This shows that Iban songs are close to the heart of Sarawakians, not only Ibans. For example, *Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis* is a favorite not only among the Iban people, but also non-Ibans from Sarawak (Borneo Talk, 2020). The Iban participants marginally agreed that Iban songs can represent the Malaysian identity (M=3.69, SD=1.01) but the mean score is clearly lower than that for the Sarawakian identity. Understandably, the Iban participants were in stronger agreement that Iban pop songs represent Sarawakian identity more than Malaysian identity because Iban is a group indigenous to Sarawak—although they have migrated to all parts of Malaysia to study, work, and settle down. This finding is not surprising given related past findings on Iban songs and layers of identities (Iban/ethnic, Sarawakian, Malaysian) (see Jerome, Perry, & Ting, 2022; Jerome, Ting, & Perry, 2022; Mohamad Said et al., 2021; Musi et al., 2022). For researchers who view the ethnic and national identities are oppositional (Nordin et al., 2018; Rahim, 2018), it may be a good sign that the iconic Iban song can represent three layers of identities. The Iban identity is a subject of the Sarawakian identity because there are many ethnic groups in Sarawak, and Sarawak is a state in Malaysia. As the Malaysian

identity is the overarching identity, it is the furthest away from the Iban identity symbolised in the song *Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis.*

Table 4
Iban Participants' Beliefs about Iban Pop Songs (N=189)

Beliefs	Half Iban parentage		Full Iban parentage		Overall	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
1. I think that Iban songs can unite the Iban race. [P]	3.98	0.66	4.25	0.86	4.19	0.83
2. I think that Iban songs can represent the identity of Sarawakians.	3.98	0.80	4.24	0.81	4.19	0.81
3. I think that Iban songs carry one's emotions.	3.63	1.13	3.89	0.89	3.84	0.95
4. I think that Iban songs can represent the Malaysian identity. [P]	3.40	0.96	3.77	1.01	3.69	1.01
5. I think that Iban songs represent the modern Iban culture. [P]	3.30	0.72	3.74	1.04	3.65	0.99
6. I think that Iban songs are of international standard. [P]	3.25	0.84	3.60	1.08	3.53	1.04
7. I think that one is considered a full Iban if he/she can sing songs in Iban.	2.50	1.22	2.83	1.32	2.76	1.30

Note. The items are on a five-point Likert scale: 1 for Strongly disagree, 2 for Disagree, 3 for Neutral, 4 for Agree, and 5 for Strongly agree. [P] Significant difference for half- and full-Iban participants at $p<.05$ (Items 1, 4, 5, and 6).

Table 4 shows that the Iban participants also agreed that Iban songs can carry one's emotions (M=3.84, SD=0.95). Many Iban pop songs tell the story of boy meets girl, and it is a love story that everyone can relate to (Borneo Talk, 2020). However, the Iban participants were reserved as to whether Iban pop songs can represent modern Iban culture (M=3.65, SD=0.99). The participants disagreed that ability to sing Iban songs is an Iban ethnic marker (M=2.76, MD=1.3). Dance, costume, building, lifestyle, heirlooms, cultural beliefs and practices (for example, deities and *pantang* or taboos) are some of the Iban identity markers. However, the ability to sing Iban songs is not an identity marker to the Iban participants, as shown in the results.

Table 4 shows that the Iban participants were almost neutral on whether pop songs are of international standard (M=3.53, SD=1.04). This shows mixed views on the quality of Iban pop songs. Voices from music composers (The Borneo Post, 2015) and politicians (The Borneo Post, 2019) called for research and upgrading of the quality of Iban songs. In an event on the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for the censorship and evaluation of local and ethnic songs organised by RTM Sarawak, the Tamin assemblyman Christopher Gira Sambang called on "artists including singers, lyricists, song composers and those behind the scene to work together to produce the best songs or masterpieces to raise the status of the music industry in Sarawak" (Abdullah, 2022, para. 10). However, to the listeners, the quality was acceptable.

T-tests showed that there were significant differences between Iban participants with half- or full-Iban parentage for the four beliefs on Iban pop songs (Table 4) at $p<.05$, that is, the role of Iban songs as a unifying factor (Item 1), representation of Malaysian identity (Item 4), and modernity (Item 5), and also perceptions of the international standard of Iban songs (Item 6). Whether the Iban songs symbolized modernity is also a form of identity association because traditional versus modern is a demarcation of one type of social identity. Participants with full

Iban parentage had higher mean scores than those with half Iban parentage. In other words, the strength of Iban ethnic identity influenced the participants' beliefs on the identity carried by Iban music as well as the quality of the songs.

Next, the results on the Iban participants' attitudes towards Iban pop songs are described based on Table 5. The mean scores for four items were about four, showing appreciation of the Iban pop songs. The Iban participants were proud of Iban songs (M=4.21, SD=0.83) and the songs increased their feeling of being Sarawakian (M=3.96, SD=0.88). The Iban songs also strengthened their connection with fellow fans of Iban songs (M=3.88, SD=0.87). The participants' pride in Iban songs concur with their amazement at the good quality of Iban songs (M=3,87, MD=0.87). However, the Iban participants vehemently denied that they felt ashamed of Iban songs (Item 5, M=1.74, SD=0.97).

Table 5
Iban Participants' Attitudes Towards Iban Pop Songs (N=189)

Dimensions of attitudes	Half Iban parentage		Full Iban parentage		Overall	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
1. I feel proud of Iban songs. [P]	3.90	0.78	4.30	0.83	4.21	0.83
2. I feel more Sarawakian when I listen to Iban songs. [P]	3.63	0.98	4.00	0.91	3.96	0.88
3. I feel connected with my friends who like to listen to Iban songs. [P]	3.85	0.62	3.99	0.94	3.88	0.87
4. I feel amazed by the quality of Iban songs. [P]	3.55	0.75	3.95	0.89	3.87	0.87
5. I feel ashamed of Iban songs. [P]	2.18	0.90	1.62	0.96	1.74	0.97

Note. The items are on a five-point Likert scale: 1 for Strongly disagree, 2 for Disagree, 3 for Neutral, 4 for Agree, and 5 for Strongly agree. [P] Significant difference for half- and full-Iban participants at p<.05 (All items)

T-tests showed no gender differences in the Iban participants' attitudes towards Iban songs, but being of half or full-Iban parentage made a significant difference in their attitudes at p<.05 (all 5 items, Table 5). The mean scores of participants with full-Iban parentage were higher than those with half-Iban parentage. In other words, participants with a strong ethnic identity are more likely to have greater pride (less shame) in Iban songs, believe in the quality of Iban pop songs, and feel more connected to friends through the songs. Participants with a strong ethnic identity are also more likely to believe in the capability of Iban pop songs to represent a Sarawakian identity beyond that of their ethnic group.

Iban Participants' Practices in Listening to Iban Pop Songs

This section presents results on the Iban participants' practices in terms of their favorite genres, ways of accessing Iban pop songs, when they listen to Iban songs, and who influenced them to like Iban pop songs. The participants accessed the Iban songs mostly through YouTube (65.61%). A fair number listened to Iban songs using the radio (17.46%) and mobile phone (15.34%) but only 1.59% still played CDs. These percentages are not shown in the tables.

Table 6 shows that the favorite genre of Iban pop songs is ballads (52.38%). The other genres were less popular: rock (16.93%) which includes the most famous Iban pop song, *Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis*. The song that the Iban participants were also familiar with is *Redak Seribu* by Masterpiece which is also in the rock genre (Table 2). Perhaps the Iban community liked to

listen to rock, as they were more familiar with rock songs than ballads (*Patah ke Lidi* by Dom Romeo) and dangdut (*Tesat Madang Bungai* by Sima). In Indonesia, dangdut was popular among the middle class and below as opposed to Indonesian pop which were for the middle class and above, but over the years, differences of class, gender, and ethnicity had levelled out (Weintraub, 2006). According to Weintraub (2006), dangdut is close to the people because of the following features:

> *(1) roots in the melodies, rhythms, and vocal style of Melayu popular music (orkes melayu); (2) Indonesian-language lyrics; (3) relatively simple style of dance (joget and goyang); (4) straightforward and easily comprehensible lyrics; and (5) texts which deal with everyday realities of ordinary people.* (p. 414)

Dangdut songs are easy for people to sing along, and the content of the songs is also close to the heart of the people.

Table 6

Frequency and Percentage of Genre of Iban Pop Songs (N=189)

Genre	Frequency	Percentage
Ballads	99	52.38
Rock	32	16.93
Others	26	13.76
Dangdut	21	11.11
Nostalgia	11	5.82
Total	189	100

Table 7 shows that the Iban participants did not only listen to Iban songs but could also sing them (M=3.87, SD=1.03). This confirms the results presented in Table 2, which showed that over 40% of the participants could fully sing nine out of the 10 Iban pop songs listed in the questionnaire. The two-tailed t-test showed that the full- and half-Iban participants were significantly different in how often they sang Iban songs at p<.05 but there was no significant difference between these two groups on how often they listened to Iban songs. The mean scores show that the full-Iban participants sang Iban songs more frequently than the half-Iban participants, suggesting greater immersion in the Iban pop culture among participants whose fathers and mothers were both Iban.

The Iban participants were in touch with the release of new Iban songs (M=3.70, SD=1.06). Nevertheless, the old Iban pop songs are still a favorite (M=3.68, SD=1.09). However, familiarity with older songs is lower, as shown by only 21.16% of the participants fully knowing the song *Kini ka nuan pegi* by Michael Jemat (Table 2). The song was released in 2008, which is only one and a half decades ago, but it has dropped in popularity compared to newer releases. This time frame gives an idea of the transient popularity of Iban pop songs and how long a song can stay in the top charts before being competed by other songs. The t-test results shed light on the possible deeper appreciation for Iban oldies among full-Iban participants. In addition, the t-test results showed that the full- and half-Iban participants were significantly different in how often they listened to old Iban songs at p<.05 but there was no significant difference between these two groups in how often they listened to new Iban songs. The mean scores suggest that Iban pop songs are probably just another source of entertainment to the half-Iban participants.

The results for another questionnaire item confirm this for the half-Iban participants. The t-test results showed that the full- and half-Iban participants were significantly different in their responses to the item on whether they listened to songs in Iban more frequently than songs in other languages at p<.05. The mean scores showed that the half-Iban participants disagreed (M=2.58, SD=1.13) whereas the full-Iban participants agreed that they listened to more Iban songs than songs in other languages (M=3.42, SD=1.14). The half-Iban participants can be said to be less ethno-centric in their music preferences. To them, the Iban songs are probably more for entertainment than an expression of their Iban identity.

Table 7

Iban Participants' Practices in Listening to Iban Pop Songs (N=189)

Practices	Half-Iban parentage		Full-Iban parentage		Overall	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
1. I often sing Iban songs. [P]	3.28	1.04	4.03	0.97	3.87	1.03
2. I often listen to new Iban pop songs.	3.40	1.22	3.78	1.01	3.70	1.06
3. I often listen to old Iban pop songs. [P]	3.20	1.16	3.81	1.04	3.68	1.09
4. I often dance or sing when attending events where Iban songs are played. [P]	3.13	1.32	3.65	1.17	3.54	1.22
5. I often attend events where Iban songs are played. [P]	2.95	1.26	3.47	1.06	3.36	1.12
6. I listen to songs in Iban more frequently than songs in other languages. [P]	2.58	1.13	3.42	1.14	3.24	1.19
7. I often listen to Iban songs when I am sad.	2.88	1.32	3.21	1.06	3.14	1.13
8. I often listen to Iban songs when I am stressed. [P]	2.68	1.23	3.24	1.04	3.12	1.10
9. I often listen to Iban songs to get inspiration. [G, P]	2.58	1.13	3.43	0.99	3.25	1.08

Note. The items are on a five-point Likert scale: 1 for Strongly disagree, 2 for Disagree, 3 for Neutral, 4 for Agree, and 5 for Strongly agree. [G] Significant gender difference at p<.05 (Item 9); [P] Significant differences between half- and full-Iban participants at p<.05 (Items 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, and 9)

Listening to Iban pop songs is a private activity for many Iban participants. They marginally agreed that they often danced or sang when attending events (e.g., weddings) where Iban songs are played (M=3.54, SD=1.22). The public has the impression that Iban songs are played in many events, but from the Iban participants' perspective, the Iban songs could have been played in more events. The t-test results showed at p<.05, there were significant differences between the full- and half-Iban participants on how often they danced or sang when attending events where Iban songs are played and how often they attended events where Iban songs are played. The mean scores show clearly that the half-Iban participants (M=3.13, SD=1.32) were less likely to dance or sing during these events than the full-Iban participants (M=3.65, SD=1.17). This is probably because the half-Iban participants were not familiar with the songs to sing along to but not because they were ashamed of the Iban songs (Table 5 results). Another reason is that the half-Iban participants attended fewer events where Iban songs were

played (M=2.95, SD=1.26) compared to the full-Iban participants (M=3.47, SD=1.06). For this, there were significant differences between the two groups of participants at p<.05. The mean score of the half-Iban participants was below the mid-point of three, whereas the mean score for the full-Iban participants was above three.

Table 7 shows interesting gender and Iban parentage differences on whether listening to Iban songs assuaged the emotions of the Iban participants. There were mixed responses on listening to Iban songs when the participants felt sad (M=3.14, SD=1.13), and there were no significant differences between half- and full-Iban participants at p<.05. However, the two-tailed t-test showed that the Iban parentage made a significant difference in whether they listened to Iban songs when they were stressed, and whether they listened to Iban songs to get inspiration at p<.05. The mean scores showed that the full-Iban participants were likely to listen to Iban songs when they were stressed (M=3.24, SD=1.05) and to get inspiration (M=3.43, SD=0.99) but this was not an avenue for half-Iban participants to either destress (M=2.68, SD=1.23) or to be inspired (M=2.58, SD=1.13). There was also a significant gender difference in whether Iban songs were a source of inspiration. The male participants (M=3.42, SD=0.99) were more likely to get inspiration from Iban pop songs than female participants (M=3.11, SD=1.13). The mean scores and standard deviation for female and male participants are not shown in Table 7 because the focus of this paper is on the differences in music consumption of half- and full-Iban participants. There were also not many items for which there were gender differences to warrant having separate t-test results tables.

To sum up the results in Table 7, Iban parentage, and by proxy strength of ethnic identity, influences how often they listen to and sing Iban songs (including oldies), dance or sing during events where Iban songs are played (including the number of such events) as well as how important the Iban songs were for de-stressing and to get inspiration.

Table 8

Agents of Influence on Iban Participants' Liking for Iban Pop Songs (N=189)

Agent of influence	Half-Iban parentage		Full-Iban parentage		Overall	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
1. I got to know Iban songs through the radio. [P]	4.03	1.07	4.46	0.74	4.37	0.84
2. I got to know Iban songs through social media.	3.98	0.95	4.28	0.85	4.22	0.88
3. I got to know Iban songs through YouTube.	3.93	1.02	4.23	0.98	4.17	0.99
4. I got to know Iban songs through my friends.	3.88	0.91	3.68	1.05	3.72	1.03
5. I got to know Iban songs through my parents.	3.48	0.91	3.70	1.07	3.66	1.04
6. I got to know Iban songs through magazines. [G]	2.35	0.95	2.64	1.04	2.58	1.03

Note. The items are on a five-point Likert scale: 1 for Strongly disagree, 2 for Disagree, 3 for Neutral, 4 for Agree, and 5 for Strongly agree. [G] Significant gender difference at p<.05 (Item 6); [P] Significant difference for half- and full-Iban participants at p<.05 (Item 1).

Finally, Table 8 shows an unexpected result. Our study revealed that Iban radio programs are crucial in inculcating an interest in Iban songs in this day and age. A majority of the Iban participants strongly agreed that they got to know Iban songs through the radio (M=4.37, SD=0.84). The mean score for this is the highest. This is the only item where the t-

test showed a significant difference between the half- and full-Iban participants. The mean scores show that more full-Iban participants got to know Iban songs through the radio (M=4.46, SD=0.74) compared to half-Iban participants (M=4.03, SD=1.07).

Social media is another agent of influence in inculcating the habit of listening to Iban songs (M=2.22), followed by YouTube (M=4.17). Friends and parents are less influential compared to social media (M=3.72 and M=3.66, respectively). The minimal influence of peers on Iban pop music consumption seems to contradict findings of earlier studies from other contexts that show that the strong role of peers (e.g., Boyle et al., 1981; Clarke, 1973; Minks, 1999; Nuttall & Tinson, 2005). Magazines did little to promote the Iban music industry and were not an agent to influence the Iban participants' habit of listening to Iban pop songs but there is a gender difference. The two-tailed t-test showed that the female and male Iban participants were significantly different on whether they got to know Iban songs through magazines at p<.05. The mean scores indicate that the female participants were almost unlikely to be influenced by magazines (M=2.38, SD=0.98) compared to male participants (M=2.83, SD=1.03). These figures are not shown in Table 8.

Discussion and Conclusion

The study on ethnic identity and consumption of Iban pop songs showed that Iban participants with full-Iban parentage are more interested in, knowledgeable about, and positive about Iban pop songs compared to half-Iban participants. The Iban participants who grow up with both parents being Iban are infused with a stronger dose of Iban culture, and their appreciation of Iban culture and Iban music is greater. They grow up hearing Iban songs played over the radio during the day in the longhouse, as this is a common practice among older folks. They celebrate festivals like Gawai with closer adherence to customs and traditions than Iban people living in urban areas among other ethnic groups. The children with full Iban parentage are likely to grow up hearing Iban folktales and the stories of Iban heroes like Rentap told by their Iban grandparents. Full-Iban participants develop a stronger Iban identity and liking for Iban music. The results support Lidskog's (2017) notion that music is a constitutive part of the culture and binds ethnic group members together. This study shows that credit should be given to parents for shaping their children's interest in Iban popular music. "Music can serve both to stabilize and maintain identities and belongings" (Likskog, 2017, p. 33). However, if one of the parents is not an Iban (e.g., Malay, Chinese, or other indigenous), then the onus falls on only one Iban parent to pass on the Iban culture and the love for Iban music. There may also be reservations about asserting the Iban identity in a mixed marriage context in the spirit of accommodation to one's spouse who is from another ethnic group.

The present study has shown that music plays an important role in indigenous ethnic identity formation for Iban participants with half- and full-Iban parentage. They are "Iban and proud". The situation of Iban pop music consumption is at opposing ends when compared to the Hindi-speaking Asian children in a London inner city primary school who were ashamed to tell people that they listen to Hindu songs but privately they disclosed this information to the researchers (Alden, 1998, as cited in Green, 2011). Our findings show that Iban pop song consumption goes hand in hand with a stronger Iban identity. Having full Iban parentage and listening to Iban songs is mutually reinforcing for the Iban participants in this study. This finding affirms Lidskog's (2017) view that music facilitates the reproduction and transformation of identities. However, we did not investigate the cause-and-effect angle of Iban music consumption. In some sense, the Iban pop songs contribute towards the reproduction of the Iban ethnicity – and it worked to fuller effect among those with full-Iban parentage than those with half-Iban parentage. This finding implies that indigenous music can be used to strengthen ethnic identification in settings where the ethnic identity is waning, particularly

when members of small indigenous groups live and work among ethnically diverse groups of people. However, the association between ethnic identity and the extensiveness of Iban music consumption is correlational and not causative because an experimental research design was not employed in the present study. An area for future research is whether the Iban participants listen to Iban pop songs to show their Iban identity or whether their stronger ethnic identity prompted them to seek out Iban music.

The present study showed no significant differences in the knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions of the Iban participants in relation to monthly income and education level. These two demographic characteristics were used as indicators of socioeconomic status in the present study. The association of Iban pop songs with socio-economic status has changed over the years. This harks back to the days when Iban songs catered to the young upper-class Ibans in urban areas (Lim, 2019). Nowadays, Iban pop songs are no longer associated with high socio-economic status. Radio and YouTube have made Iban pop songs accessible to everyone. In other words, the liking for Iban pop songs transcends social class and somewhat gender. In Indonesia, a similar phenomenon happened with dangdut, whereby dangdut seemed to have erased inequalities of class, gender, and ethnicity, and became a national trend (Weintraub, 2006). The implication of this finding is that Iban pop songs are egalitarian in their appeal and, therefore, would have a wider reach among listeners compared to songs that cater to certain segments of the population. However, in Indonesia, the audience appeal of dangdut is changing. Weintraub (2006) pointed out that the appeal of dangdut was in its reflection of everyday lives but the recent media coverage of dangdut celebrities performing in glamourous outfits and settings is taking dangdut away from the ordinary lives of a majority of its fans. It is not certain whether attempts to take Iban pop songs to international stature and beyond the confines of the indigenous group would cause the songs to lose their character and appeal in time to come.

From the perspective of the listeners of Iban pop songs which we explored in the present study, we found that Iban pop songs have a multi-dimensional role. The Iban participants listened to the songs when they experience both positive and negative emotions, and they seemed to be more familiar with Iban pop songs in the rock genre. The 10 Iban pop songs examined in the study were about romance. In the past, Iban songs were used for sending messages on nation-building (Lim, 2019; Lim et al., 2016), but it seems that although the lyrics of *Biar Bekikis Bulu Betis* have nothing to do with this, it engenders a Sarawakian identity and, to some extent, a Malaysian identity. This is an interesting role that has evolved for this Iban pop song, which was originally written to show the love of a man for a woman. This is probably a reflection of the contemporary role of indigenous music in identity formation. In Indonesia, Widayo, Haryono, and Wiyoso's (2022) comparison of traditional Javanese songs and the New or Modern Javanese song revealed a change from song lyrics on behavioral guidance and knowledge cultivation to romance and are no longer confined to the form of poetry rhymes and lines. The fans of traditional Javanese songs go for the message of the song and do not recognize certain scales (Widayo et al., 2022). Widayo et al. (2022) stated that listeners prefer songs that relate to their emotional experiences and are relevant to their personal and social cultures is crucial to this discussion. In the present study too, the Iban participants appreciate the fact that the Iban pop songs can carry their emotions and connect them with other people who like Iban songs. This finding implies that songs have an appeal beyond the literal meaning of the lyrics.

A potent area for future research is the causal relationship between Iban pop music consumption and strength of ethnic identity, that is, whether the Iban participants listen to Iban pop songs to intentionally express their Iban group membership and feel a sense of belonging with other Iban people, or their stronger ethnic identity prompted them to seek out Iban music. The latter would indicate that listening to Iban music is a natural behavior of Iban people, particularly those whose parents are both Iban as they grow up in homes where the Iban identity is reproduced, not only in the form of traditional identity markers such as cuisine, customs,

rituals and celebrations but also music preferences. Our study did not employ interviews to identify particular reasons why the Iban participants liked a particular song, and we also did not ask them to rank the songs in terms of liking. This is an angle for further investigation to understand what puts certain Iban pop songs and artists in the top charts, providing insights into qualities that will spur the indigenous music industry in the future. Such studies will shed light on the appeal of Iban pop songs to the Iban community, Sarawakians and Malaysians, and possibly an international audience.

Data Availability Statement

The data used to support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.

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