
KODÁLY INSPIRED RESEARCH IN MALAYSIA: KENYAH SONGS IN MUSIC EDUCATION

BY CHONG PEK LIN
(D. MUS, UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA)

I. FOREWORD

I set out with eager anticipation to read Dr Chon Pek Lin's paper, *Kodály Inspired Research in Malaysia: Kenyah Songs in Music Education*. I did not know about her work until my music teacher colleagues in Malaysia, but even more so my friend, teacher, and education journalist Teréz Tóth drew my attention to Dr Chong's ethnomusicological and music pedagogical activities. Everything I read reaffirmed my conviction that the inspiring power of Zoltán Kodály's oeuvre served as focal point for not only his disciples and colleagues in his lifetime but it still radiates to this day resulting in international spread of his music pedagogy which overarch across continents with its fertilizing effect. The international popularity of Kodály's music pedagogy is mostly due to those Hungarian school music teachers, whose pedagogical activities shaped by artistic demand directed the attention of the international music scene towards the effectiveness of the Hungarian music teaching practice developed on the basis of Kodály's principles.

I hope that the publication of these and other similarly important writings in the Parlando journal will not only foster the awareness of the Hungarian music pedagogical society and the Hungarian public to the greatest and still to be followed traditions of Hungarian music education, but also further enrich our knowledge in music pedagogy. I hope it will make us more receptive to accommodating all other music education practice that can help us bring the music teaching practice of Hungarian schools out of its current cataleptic state.

Dear Teréz! Dear Parlando Editorial Board! Thank you for making this very interesting and instructive writing available!

Dr. habil. László Norbert Nemes
Professor
Director
Kodály Institute of the Liszt Ferenc Academy of Music

II.

Introduction for Dr. Chong Lek Lin's paper:

Kodály Inspired Research in Malaysia: Kenyah Songs in Music Education

Dr. Chong Pek Lin is one of the Malaysian music educators whom I admire greatly and look up to. She began teaching choir at a local school, and faced the same challenges as most teachers in Malaysia - that is, to find suitable local music for our students. Due to time constraints, most teachers would have used existing music mainly – consisting of mostly Western repertoire - in their teaching. Dr. Chong, however, took the opposite approach – she went out in search of music that represented Malaysian roots, inspired by Kodály's philosophy of applying one's own music in one's teaching. Kodály believed that folk music is the representation of national characteristics. This musical mother-tongue is a combination of the musical expressions and forms that distinguish the differences between nations. Dr. Chong proceeded to collect traditional songs from the rich musical heritage available in Borneo Island, especially from the Kenyah Community. She transcribed these songs for the benefit of music teachers as well as generations of students in Malaysia. She started her journey at a critical time, just before these important cultural legacies became extinct. This adventurous journey of searching and transcribing took her more than 20 years. Today, we are so proud to be able to share this beautiful music with the world but it all began with just one humble initiative from our national treasure, Dr. Chong Pek Lin.

Susanna Saw

Vice-President, International Kodály Society

Director, Young Choral Academy

III.



Dr Chong Pek Lin

Kodály Inspired Research in Malaysia: Kenyah Songs in Music Education. **by Chong Pek Lin (D. Mus, University of Pretoria)**

Introduction

I started my career as a Chemistry teacher in Sarawak, East Malaysia, on the island of Borneo. When I wasn't in the laboratory, I trained the school choir. One frustration I had was the dearth of local folk songs available for my choir to sing, especially those from my home state of Sarawak. Most of the materials used by local choirs were arrangements of patriotic songs, contemporary western repertoire, and a sprinkling of pan-Malaysian-Indonesian folksongs in diatonic scales. Except for one song, *Liling*, I could not find any scores of songs reflecting the culture or landscape of Sarawak. This frustration was magnified tenfold when I became a music education lecturer in an Institute of Teacher Education. In 1993, together with music lecturers throughout Malaysia, I was introduced to the Kodály method. Inspired by the Kodály philosophy with its emphasis on cultivating music literacy and appreciation through singing, we were eager to enlighten our own teacher-trainees about this joyful approach to music teaching. However, we were handicapped by the lack of transcribed folksongs from our own country, especially those in pentatonic scales.

Despite the emphasis on the use of folksongs in contemporary music pedagogy, music teachers in Malaysian schools have little access to genuine folksongs from the nation. The songbooks provided by the Education ministry (KBSR¹ songbooks 1982, 1984 and 1992) were written by teams of music teachers during the 1980s, then unaware of philosophies of music education based on the development of musical concepts in children. Although the lyrics of the songs were in the national language (Malay), the tunes often reflected Western European tonalities and rhythms. Instead of basing their choice of songs on a logical sequence of melodic patterns, the team produced numerous songs in major pentachords² and major scales. The emphasis was on "suitable lyrics", "simple" melodies within a small vocal range, and "straightforward rhythms" (Chong, 1997: 9–14). The number of folksongs was paltry (7.9 %), there was a deluge of songs in the major scale (85.9 %), a small percentage in the minor scale and an almost negligible number in pentatonic modes (3.7 %). The few folksongs present were mainly in diatonic scales (major, natural and harmonic minor). In comparison, educationists in countries such as the United States have developed materials based on their own folksongs to replace the original Hungarian songs that accompany Kodály materials. Often, we resorted to clumsy translations of American songs or substituting lyrics with an entirely new context.

Yet, I was a proud resident of Borneo, the third largest island in the world, home to over forty indigenous groups. Surely, I wondered, we had indigenous melodious songs in various tonalities, which would appeal to schoolchildren. So far, I had come across one such song, *Liling*, with an anhemitonic pentatonic melody, originating from the Kenyah community of Sarawak. Subsequent research in the Sarawak museum archives yielded several descriptions (but no musical transcriptions) of two ethnic groups, the Kenyah and Kayan, who practiced choral singing, held frequent musical gatherings and, intriguingly, sang in harmony. Both these communities lived in remote villages, accessible only by river or by rough logging roads. This was the beginning of my sojourn into the far interior of Borneo in search of songs.

Fieldwork among the Kenyah

Initially, I began fieldwork in Kayan villages in the lower Baram but soon realised that Kayan songs were limited in melodic variety. Although their songs were of great ethnomusicological value, they did not fit my purpose: my focus was on materials for direct application in the music classroom and for attractive repertoire for my choir. Thus, I ventured further upriver, to the Kenyah, who have provided me with a rich repertoire of songs and continued to amaze me with their musical ingenuity for over 20 years.

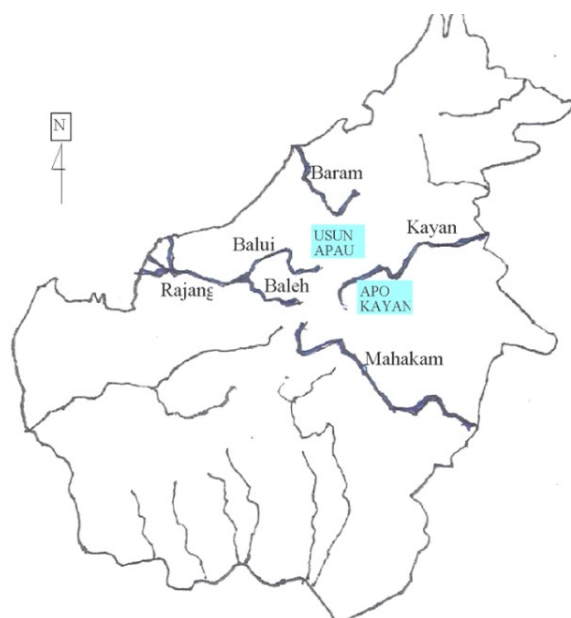
Borneo island is divided politically between Malaysia (the states of Sarawak and Sabah), Indonesia (the province of Kalimantan) and Brunei. The Kenyah are a minority indigenous group dwelling on the upper reaches of four of Borneo's major rivers: the Baram and Balui in Sarawak, and the Mahakam and Kayan in Kalimantan. In the past, there were also significant numbers on the Usun Apau plateau and Kalimantan's Apo Kayan highlands. The Kenyah possess a rich vocal tradition of melodious songs with a secular text, many sung in two-part harmony. They also play several instruments such as the *sape* (a boat-shaped lute) and *jatung utang* (a wooden xylophone) tuned to pentatonic scales. Due to the remote location of Kenyah villages, most of their

¹ *Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Rendah* (Integrated Primary School Curriculum).

² *d r m f s*.

vocal repertoire is unknown to the public, and when I began fieldwork in 1996, hardly any had been documented.

Fieldwork involved complicated journeys by river, traversing hazardous rapids and rough logging roads to remote Kenyah settlements. These included seven locations in the Baram (Long Moh, Long San, Long Selatong, Long Mekaba, Long Tungan, Long Semiyang and Long Lama) and three in the Balui (Uma Sambop, Uma Badang and Uma Baka'), where I had the privilege of observing and documenting a rich music and dance culture.



Map of Borneo Island showing the four major rivers inhabited by the Kenyah.

Kenyah Songs

Kenyah songs are different from 'Western-influenced' contemporary songs. While the latter are based mainly on diatonic major and minor scales, Kenyah songs are overwhelmingly pentatonic. In addition, many of the dance-songs are sung in homophonic harmony and most display a metric regularity (Gorlinski, 1995; Chong, 1997). Apart from being valuable additions to world folk music repertoire, these songs could fill a conspicuous void in music education, especially in the implementation of the Kodály approach in Malaysian schools.

Sadly, most of these songs may disappear soon if they are not documented and disseminated beyond the confines of Kenyah longhouses. Few Kenyah under the age of fifty can still sing the songs. The original music culture is being displaced by the influence of the mass media and the hegemony of Malay and Western popular music. Cultural transmission is hindered by several factors. Firstly, over the last 50 years there has been a drastic rural-urban drift for economic gain. Many villages are half deserted, while those in town seldom teach the younger generation the songs, as conditions there are not conducive to communal music making. A second factor is the implementation of education in the interior. Due to the hazards of boat travel, upriver children are sent to boarding schools from the age of seven. Thus, even for families resident in the village, children are away for most of the school year and have little exposure to the songs. A third factor is the recent government policy of building mega hydro-electric dams to harness the power of Sarawak's rivers. As the Kenyah live in the upper reaches of two major rivers, this has resulted in the flooding of many villages and farms, and the relocation of their homes, e.g. in the Balui, the Bakun dam has displaced 10,000 people from 15 villages. The mass relocation has negatively impacted traditional choral singing.

Since 1996, I have endeavoured to document this dying breed of songs, transcribing and analysing over a hundred songs. Many are featured, with translations, in three published books³. With the help of student

³ *Songs from the Kenyah Community* (1998), *Songs from the Baram* (2006) and *Introduction to Selected Musical Ensembles and Folksongs of East Malaysia* (2011).

facilitators, I have also introduced them to schoolchildren, university students, teachers and assorted choirs in workshops under various projects⁴. My students from the ITE Batu Lintang⁵ have also performed the songs on stage in choral performances and musical dramas to appreciative urban audiences.

Three categories of songs particularly attractive for music education purposes are discussed below:

- (i) *Belian dado'* (long-dance songs)
- (ii) Children's songs
- (iii) Songs associated with instrumental music

(i) *Belian Dado'*

Traditionally, the Kenyah live in longhouses, which consist of adjoining private family apartments opening into a common veranda. The wide, airy veranda provides an excellent stage (with informal seating along the sides) for musical gatherings. The first item in a long evening of entertainment are the *belian dado'* (long-dance songs), sung while performing an informal line-dance, the *tu'ut dado'*. This dance consists basically of a step and brush punctuated with stamps at the end of phrases. There are variations to the steps for specific songs, often associated with the lyrics. The formation moves counterclockwise along the veranda of the longhouse. Anyone is free to join in at any time, with participants varying in age from toddlers to octogenarians! A soloist sings the first phrase or two, while the others join in at the beginning of the next phrase or at the chorus.



Belian dado' singers, Long Semiyang, 2004

Displaying a strophic structure, they consist of several phrases of irregular length. They are regular metrically, mostly 4/4 or 2/4 with some flexibility in the beat, akin to a 'swing' beat. The majority (74.5 %) of the transcribed repertoire have melodies built on the anhemitonic pentatonic scale. However, this statement belies the wide range of tonality represented in the repertoire. There are a significant number in the major scale (14.9 %) while others display *la*-tetratonic, hemitonic pentatonic, *so*-hexatonic and *re*-hexatonic scales (10.6 %). Thus, the melodies display a varied tonality unlike the sanitized KBSR songs. A unique characteristic is the multipart choral singing (mainly two-part harmony) present in 45 % of the songs. The following table shows the tonal structures and meters of a selection of these songs.

⁴ *From upriver longhouses to the modern classroom*, funded by The United States Ambassador's fund for cultural preservation and *Introducing traditional musical ensembles and folk songs of East Malaysia to schoolchildren*, funded by the ISME-Gibson Award.

⁵ Institute of Teacher Education Batu Lintang, Kuching, Sarawak

Table 1: *Belian dado'* (tonal structure and meter)

	Title of Song	Tone set ⁶	Mode	Ambitus	Meter
1	<i>Abe Na'on Nekun</i>	<i>s t d r m f</i> (<i>d m f s l ta</i>)	<i>So</i> -hexatonic ⁷	7	4/4
2	<i>Along</i>	M: <i>s, l d r m s</i> H: <i>s l d'</i>	<i>Do</i> -pentatonic ⁸	8	4/4
3	<i>Are Ruti</i>	M: <i>l, d r m s l d'</i> H: <i>d s l d'</i>	<i>Do</i> -pentatonic	10	4/4
4	<i>Bampa Lale</i>	<i>d r m s l d' r' m'</i>	<i>Do</i> -pentatonic	10	2/4
5	<i>Belabau Alih Silon</i>	M: <i>l, d r m s l</i> H: <i>s l d'</i>	<i>Do</i> -pentatonic	8	4/4; 2/4
6	<i>Iko Kenai</i>	<i>l, d r m f s l t d'</i>	Major	10	4/4 ; 2/4
7	<i>Ilun Kuai</i>	M: <i>m, s l d r m</i> H: <i>l d r</i>	<i>So</i> -pentatonic	8	4/4
8	<i>Kuai Mapping</i>	<i>d r m s l</i> Bitonal	<i>Do</i> -pentatonic	9	4/4
9	<i>Kun Nelan-e</i>	<i>s, l, d r m s l</i>	<i>Do</i> -pentatonic	9	4/4
10	<i>Lan-e</i> version 1 (Baram)	M: <i>s, l, d r m s l</i> H: <i>r m s l d' r'</i>	<i>Do</i> -pentatonic	9	4/4 ; 2/4
11	<i>Lan-e Tuyang</i> version 1	M: <i>s, l d r m s</i> H: <i>s, d r m s l d'</i>	<i>Re</i> -pentatonic	8	4/4 ; 2/4
12	<i>Liling</i>	M: <i>s, l, d r m s l d'</i> H: <i>s l d'</i>	<i>Do</i> -pentatonic	11	4/4
13	<i>Mudung Ina</i>	<i>l d r m s</i>	<i>Do</i> -pentatonic	8	2/4
14	<i>Sayang Dau Kenai Tawai</i>	<i>s, l, d r m f s l t d'</i>	Major	11	4/4
15	<i>Ule Kun Along</i>	<i>l d r m</i>	<i>La</i> -tetratonic	5	4/4

Context of lyrics

Apart from the tonal variety of the melodies, the lyrics of the songs colorfully depict Kenyah culture and lifestyle in the interior of Borneo. Many songs focus on welcoming guests to the longhouse and emphasize the joy of being together. Other verses, often within the same song feature nostalgic sentiment, reminiscence, and longing for absent friends. This emotional duality is a common characteristic of Kenyah song, displaying their fun-loving nature, yet also reflecting the poignancy of such gatherings. Due to the hazards of travel to their remote villages, visitors and hosts may not meet again for years, if ever. Some songs relate historical events, such as *Abe na'on nekun* ("We can go no further") which tells of one clan's narrow escape from annihilation by enemies who pursued them to the edge of a steep waterfall. *Sayang Dau Kenai Tawai* ("Love so deep, it cannot be spoken") is a touching love-song, while others, such as *Kuai Mapping* ("Argus pheasant fans its feathers") depict the local landscape and fauna. Three songs, *Mudung Ina*, *Lane* (Baram version 1) and *Ilun Kuai* with details focusing on their value to music education are described here.

⁶ M = melody; H = harmony; tonal center in bold font; *s*, denotes low *so*; *d'* denotes high *do*.

⁷ Six-tone mode with *so* as tonal center.

⁸ Anhemitonic *do*-pentatonic: Five-tone gapped mode with no semitones; *do* as tonal center.

Transcription 1: *Mudung Ina* (Chong, 2006:28)

[sung in Kg. Perpindahan, Marudi 1996, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MTXBarPIZBM> ; sung by ITE Batu Lintang choir, 2006, [audio-clip 1](#)]

Tonal center G; *do*-pentatonic Tone-set: *l d r m s* Metre: duple

Ti - ang mo' mu - dung i - na Ti - ang mo' mu - dung i - na

Ti - ang nga li - nget ma - ta Ti - ang mo' ta - at le - san

Oi mo' ne - lan lon - de Ti - ang mo' mo - on ta - wai u - yan me

Mudung Ina begins with everyone pointing to distant mountains (always visible from Kenyah villages). It portrays life in a rural setting, featuring different scenes in each verse, enacted by the singers with fixed, often comic movements which never fail to elicit laughter. The lyrics and accompanying actions make this an attractive song for class-teaching. They provide a realistic context of life in rural areas, and insights into animal behavior (such as that of hornbills and monkeys) of which urban children would be largely ignorant.

The melody is especially amenable to the teaching of solfa at the elementary stage, as the limited number of tones (*l d r m s*), slow tempo and even rhythm make it easy to hand-sign. Older students can be guided to appreciate the underlying wistfulness, aptly portrayed in its sentimental melody. Although the melody of *Mudung Ina* is categorized as *do*-pentatonic, the opening phrase (*d d l, d*) features a '*la*-pentatonic' or '*minor*' chord, then gradually shifts to *do*-pentatonic or major tonality in which it ends. The first four verses are given below.

Lyrics

1. *Tiang mo' mudung ina*
Tiang mo' mudung ina
Tiang nga linget mata
Tiang mo' ta'at lesan

Chorus:

Oi mo nelan londe
Tiang mo' mo-on tawai
Uyan me

2. *Tiang mo' pabat piboi*
Tiang mo' pabat piboi
Tiang mo' adang toi
Tiang mo' payun peman

3. *Tiang mo' piboi pabat*
Tiang mo' piboi pabat
Tiang mo' kulong kuyat
Tiang mo' mecun da'an

4. *Tiang mo' madong juong*
Tiang mo' madong juong
Tiang mo' kusun lesong
Tiang mo' mecat siai

Translation

Friends behold that mountain
Friends behold that mountain
Though clouds block our view
We can see through clearly

Chorus:

Truly dear friends,
We long for times gone by

Friends let's chase and run
Friends let's chase and run
Like hornbills we flock together
With our arms around each other

Friends let's run and chase
Friends let's run and chase
We are like pet monkeys
Treading on and rattling the branches

Friends we squat down together
Friends we squat down together
With mortar and pestle
We pound rice and smoke meat

Actions

Verse 1	Point to a distant mountain (mountains are visible most Kenyah longhouses)
Chorus	Stretch hands and flick wrist up as if dancing Then cross wrists and place hands over heart
Verse 2	Run in single file in a circle. Flap arms like a bird Turn to face inwards; place arms around each other's shoulders
Verse 3	Run in single file in a circle. Stamp on the floor, while lifting shoulders in 'ape-like' manner (imitating monkeys treading on branches)
Verse 4	Squat down and 'pound padi' with mortar and pestle

The next song, *Lan-e* ("Truly so") was sung in every Baram Kenyah village I visited, always in harmony. The lyrics reflect a common theme: welcoming visitors and lauding them for braving the difficult journey upriver.

Transcription 2: *Lan-e* version 1 [sung in Long Selatong 1996, [audio-clip 2](#); similar chorus, Long Moh, 1996, https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCw1uI_1Tw4PCw-_N2L3KDbQ]

Tonal center C; *do*-pentatonic Meter: quadruple Tone set (Melody): *s, l, d r m s l d'*
(Harmony): *r m s l d' r'*

The musical score is written for two parts: Chorus (Kerahan) and Leader. It is in 4/4 time and uses a pentatonic scale. The lyrics are in Indonesian and English. The score is divided into four systems, each with a measure number (5, 9, 14) at the beginning of the Chorus part.

System 1 (Measures 1-4):

Chorus (Kerahan): Lan

Leader: Men-chat ke - nai ne lo' i - ko ti - ang me - tik Lan

System 2 (Measures 5-8):

Chorus: su - ngai li - mun lan

Leader: su - ngai me - tik su - ngai li - mun lan

System 3 (Measures 9-12):

Chorus: ka - nan Ne - lan ne - lan

Leader: ka - nan ah Ne - lan ne - lan

System 4 (Measures 13-16):

Chorus: e ne - lan e ne - lan e

Leader: e e - ne - lan ne - lan e ne - lan e

Lyrics
Mencat kenai
Ne lo' iko tiang metik
Lan sungai
Metik sungai limun kanan
Chorus:
Ah nelan, nelan-e
Nelan-e

Translation
 Seldom do you come
 My friends you have travelled upriver
 This river
 Up this great river
Chorus:
 Ah true, truly so,
 Truly so

Multipart singing

The main melody is sung by the leader, while others join in the *kerahang* or choral response, in two to three-part homophonic harmony. The melody is anhemitonic pentatonic (*s, l, d r m s l d'*) as is the upper voice (*r m s l d'*). The following discussion is based on an analysis of the considerable repertoire of multipart Kenyah songs that I have encountered.

The contour of the accompanying part generally follows the melodic contour of the melody, often resulting in a succession of parallel fourths or fifths. However, the parallelism is never overwhelming (it is often alternated with 6^{ths}, 3^{rds} and occasional octaves), and the result is a pleasing consonance. However, it is evident that the Kenyah aesthetic seeks to maintain melodic interest in the accompanying voice. This voice is like a descant or alto with a distinct and attractive melody. This characteristic makes the songs especially suitable as teaching materials, as the subsidiary voice is easily taught and remembered by rote. I have found this characteristic to be extremely valuable in coaching singers with no previous experience in part-singing, and who are unfamiliar with sight-reading. Although the song presents a challenging rhythm, more suitable for older children, the chorus would be suitable for elementary solfa practice and hand-signing even for elementary stages).

Applications in the classroom and on stage

There are also shorter, simpler multipart songs which would be appropriate for younger children in the beginning stages of a *Kodály* based curriculum. I personally taught the next song, *Ilun Kuai* (Transcription 3) to a fourth-grade class at a Malay-medium school as part of a research project introducing schoolchildren to Kenyah songs. I found that this class of ten-year-olds from six different ethnic groups (none of whom were Kenyah) were eager to sing the songs learn and learn about the culture, especially when I brought ethnic costumes and instruments to class.

Transcription 3: *Ilun Kuai* (Chong and Lajinga 2011: 28)

[performed in Long Moh, 2009, <https://youtu.be/Pcd5YllluG0>; sung by ITE Batu Lintang, 2013 [audio-clip 3](#)]

Tonal center: F; so-pentatonic

Meter: quadruple Tone set (Melody): *m, s l d r m*
(Harmony): *l d r*

I - - lun ku ai ma-ping ke - nai u - jan su-
 Ku - ai me - kat Li - de si - lat sang u -
 Ku - ai me - ku na - lan bi - o te te-

4
 gai I - - lun ku - ai
 san I - - lun ku - ai
 ngang I - - lun ku - ai

Lyrics

- Ilun Kuai*
Maping kenai ujan sungai
Ilun kuai
- Kuai mekat*
Lide silat sang⁹ usan
Ilun kuai
- Kuai meku*
Nalan bio ne te tengang
Ilun kuai

Translation

- Orphaned pheasant
Fans the rainwater here
Orphaned pheasant
- Pheasant scratching
The decaying leaves of the fan-palm
Orphaned pheasant
- Hoarse-voiced pheasant
Caught in a big trap
Orphaned pheasant

⁹ *Sang* are the young leaves of *licuala valida* (a species of fan-palm); *silat* are the mature leaves of the same plant; *lide* are decaying leaves

- | | | |
|---|---|--|
| 4 | <i>Kuai puteh</i>
<i>Mayep murik alut takeng</i>
<i>Ilun kuai</i> | White pheasant
Beckons to push out the boats
Orphaned pheasant |
|---|---|--|

Kuai is the Kenyah term for the Argus pheasant (*Argusianus argus*). The tail feathers of the male, spectacularly covered with large ‘eye-spots’, often adorn the warrior hats of several indigenous Borneo groups. I brought a feather to class, prompting questions such as “Is it real?”, “Is it plastic?”, “Is the bird extinct?”, “How does it dance (The verse, ‘*Kuai mekat*’, refers to the male pheasant scraping the ground in preparation for a mating dance)? They eagerly learnt the traditional movements imitating the bird’s movements. The lyrics, featuring mystical orphaned *kuai*, and the sad, gentle tune, seemed to strike a chord with the children. As the Argus is a protected species, the song also sparked discussion on environmental issues.



Argus pheasant males clear the ground to perform a mating dance (Smythies 1968: 185).

The children learnt to sing the song, first in unison and later in harmony. This was manageable as only the last short phrase was in two parts. Playing the melody with the descant on the recorder helped them to distinguish between the two parts. They also enjoyed performing the song in groups, dramatizing it using costumes and props.

An analysis of the complete version of seven verses, and observation of the actions of the Long Moh dancers revealed a deeper significance to the songs. The *kuai*, according to Kenyah folklore, have the power to bring rainfall. Working with a team of ITE Batu Lintang students in 2018, we staged a drama (in song, dance and instrumental music) telling a story of *kuai* bringing relief to a village plagued by drought.



ITE Batu Lintang team (Chong, back row second left) present Kenyah songs for the Rainforest Fringe Festival in Sarawak, 2017

(ii) Children’s Songs

Apart from dance-songs, I tried to search for children’s songs and lullabies. To my disappointment, the children could only sing a few Kenyah songs; their ‘repertoire’ consisted mostly of English and Malay songs. Fortunately, some of the adults gamely sang and enacted for me, a few additional gems such as Bong Sekibong, sung while while splashing river in rhythm while they bathed. The songs, with a variety of tone-sets, and lyrics

richly reflecting a rural Asian lifestyle, would be useful material for music teachers. Several examples are listed in Table 2.



The author collecting children's songs, Long Moh, 1996

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Table 2: Children's Songs

	Title of Song	Tone set	Scale/mode	Ambitus	Theme
1	<i>Go Garo</i>	<i>m s l</i>	tritone	4	Game-song
2	<i>Eh Eh Luwe</i>	<i>m, s, l d r m s</i>	do-pentatonic	10	Lullaby
3	<i>Sua Ulem</i>	<i>d r m s</i>	do-pentatonic	5	Play-party song
4	<i>Tai Uyau Along</i> (Baram version)	<i>d r m f s l t d'</i>	major	8	Misadventures of Uyau Along
5	<i>Bong Sekibong</i> (version 2)	<i>m f s l d</i>	so-pentachord	6	game-song while bathing in the river.

Go garo is the final song in a cycle of five delightful play-songs with fixed actions, ending in a session of hide-and seek. The lyrics are engagingly rhythmic and cheeky, playfully reflecting the lifestyle of upriver Sarawak in the past century.

Transcription 4: *Go Garo* (Chong, 1998:12)

Tonal center C; Tritonic Meter: Duple Tone-set: *m s l*

Go Gang Go Gang ga - ro ga - ro Be' ke'ng - kin i - ko na - uk
Ga Gang ga - rang ga - rang Be' ke'ng kin {child's name} ma - dang

Bang Bang cho' er be - ti - sep bu - lu' Tong Peti Tu kapan be! Tum!

Lyrics	Translation
<i>Go, go garo garo</i>	<i>Go garo</i> [Vocables]
<i>Be' ke' 'ngkin iko nauk</i>	I can't bring you farming
<i>Bang cho' betisep bulu'</i>	Because you drank wine
<i>Tong Tube'!</i>	Now you fall!
 <i>Gang gang garang garang</i>	 <i>Gang garang</i> [Vocables]
<i>Be' ke' 'ngkin [child's name] madang</i>	I can't bring [child's name] to fly
<i>Bang er betisep telang</i>	Because you drank
<i>Peti kapan</i>	Banana juice
<i>Tum! Ma'op!</i>	Fall! Cover your eyes!

The leader (an adult or older child) sings the first verse of *Go garo* while holding each child's feet in turn and knocking them on the floor in rhythm. When she calls "*Tong Tube!*" the child throws himself down. She then sings the second verse (*Gang garang*) while performing the same actions for the last child (who will be "it"). When the leader calls "*Tum*", the other children turn and lie face-down. On the call "*Maop*", everyone covers their eyes, while the chosen child hides. After calling "*Lepa?*" ("Ready?") thrice, they begin the search.

The melody is built on the universal children's chant: *sol mi* with one auxiliary note (*la*), appropriate for pre-school. Children will enjoy having their names inserted into specific verses of the song as indicated.

(iii) Songs Associated with Instrumental Melodies

Kenyah instrumental music is generally played as dance accompaniment, for recreational purposes in small groups, or as an outlet for individual expression. In the traditional context, it is not performed together with vocal music. In search of other songs with simple tone-sets, I interviewed the musicians, asking them if there were songs associated with the instrumental tunes that they played. Amused, they sang short songs with witty lyrics referencing local culture, corresponding to the basic motifs of popular *sape*, *jatung utang* and *lutong* tunes (examples are listed in Table 3).



The author with Kenyah musicians, Long Moh, 2009

Table 3: Songs associated with instrumental tunes

	Title of Song	Tone set	Scale/mode	Ambitus	Theme
1	<i>Det Diet</i> (Baram version)	<i>d r m s l d'</i>	<i>do</i> -pentatonic	8	Plucking of <i>sape</i> /dance-costume
2	<i>Sai Ulai</i>	<i>s, d r m s</i>	<i>so</i> -tetratonic	8	Returning home by boat
3	<i>Chut Tunyang</i>	<i>s, l, d r m s</i>	<i>do</i> -pentatonic	8	Rejected suitor
4	<i>Ilun pesak pakui</i>	<i>̣ l d r m s</i>	<i>do</i> -pentatonic	8	Cooking jungle ferns
5	<i>Ti Ruti Lun</i>	<i>d r m s</i>	tetratonic	5	Calling a lover to bed

The next two songs, *Det Diet* and *Chut Tunyang*, are associated with the *sape* and *jatung utang*. As both instruments are tuned to pentatonic scales, these songs had tone-sets very useful for the earlier stages of a Kodály centred music curriculum

Transcription 5: *Det diet* (Baram version, Chong, 2006:56)
[sung by ITE Batu Lintang Choir, 2006, [audio-clip 4](#)]

Tonal center: F; do-pentatonic Tone-set : *d r m s l d'*



Musical notation for *Det diet* in 4/4 time, F major pentatonic scale. The melody consists of eighth and quarter notes. The lyrics are: Det di - et ta - pong-u - lat ki - tan Det di - et ta - pong u - lat ki - tan. The second line starts with a measure rest of 5 measures.

Lyrics

Det diet
Tapong ulat kitan

Translation

Det diet (onomatopoeia- imitating the sound of the plucking of sape)
Hat woven from bearcat fur

Det diet is a song associated with a popular dance tune. Before the bearcat was declared a protected species, its tail-fur was used as material for hats, often worn by male dancers. When performing the mesmerizing solo warrior dance, male dancers often nod their heads in imitation of bird movements, thus drawing attention to the splendor of their hats. This song, sung to me by well-known sape player Matthew Ngau, is used to help beginning *sape* players familiarize themselves with the tuning of the movable frets (*nden*).

Pedagogical interest: The melody is suitable for introducing the basic anhemitonic pentatonic scale *d r m s l*

Transcription 6: *Chut Tunyang* (Chong & Lajinga, 2011:21)

[sung in Long Moh, 2009, <https://youtu.be/vgxevgZGRJA>; performed by ITE Batu Lintang students, 2017, https://youtu.be/zK4_s4Hc7TM]

Tonal center F; do-pentatonic Metre: quadruple Tone-set: *s, l d r m s*



Musical notation for *Chut Tunyang* in quadruple time, F major pentatonic scale. The melody consists of eighth and quarter notes. The lyrics are: Be' un U - tan ke - loh ke - na se - pak me - lu Se - lem se -
yang chut tun - yang na' ma - u Chut tun -
lem yang tai'ee na' me du lu Sai'-ee a - me di - a ku - a si - lung a -
yang Chut tun - yang na' ma - u Chut tun
su Chut tun - yang Chut tun - yang na' ma - u Chut tun

Lyrics

Be'un Utan keloh kena sepak melu
Selem-selem taiee na' me dulu
Saiee ame dia kua silung asu?
Chut tunyang, chut tunyang na'mau

Translation

The young lady doesn't want the betel nut (symbol of courtship)
Secretly I slip away
So ashamed, does my face resemble a dog's?
Stepping in the mud, stepping in the mud at night

This song tells of a forlorn suitor slinking off in the dark (in the interior, this entails stepping on muddy ground, hence the refrain *chut tunyang* – to step in the mud) after being rejected by the girl his heart desires.

Potential suitors express their interest in pursuing a relationship with a girl by offering her *sepak melu*, a concoction of betel nut, betel leaves and lime paste (traditional snack in many Asian societies). If the girl refuses the offering, he knows he has been rejected. The cheeky lyrics reflect Kenyah courting rituals and social interactions. In Kenyah villages, any gathering is inevitably graced with the partaking of *sepak melu*.

Pedagogical interest: The simple tone-set, symmetrical phrasing and rhythmic structure make it amenable to solfa exercises in the earlier stages of teaching singing according to the Kodály method. The culturally rich text (betel nut chewing, courting rituals, muddy roads) could spark interesting discussions on life in the rural areas of Southeast Asia. The tune could be sung and played on an instrument, and traditional dance movements performed with it. Subsequently it could then be used for tonic-solfa practice.

Investigating the responses of Schoolchildren to Kenyah Songs

A pertinent issue to examine is the practicality of bringing Kenyah songs to the modern classroom, and to consider the ensuing recontextualization of the music. In 2011, I enlisted the help of ten teacher-trainees and four serving teachers to introduce the songs to eleven elementary schools and to study the responses of the children (Chong 2013, 243-262). For a period of eight weeks, the children were taught (along with any other songs the teachers deemed suitable) several Kenyah songs applying the Kodály approach of movable *do*. The teachers were free to choose any songs from the two books supplied (Chong 2006; Chong & Lajinga 2011). One challenge in teaching the songs was the fact that the Kenyah constitute only 2 % of the Sarawak populace. Thus, urban schoolchildren would be unfamiliar with their language and culture. The medium of instruction in five of the schools was Malay, while the other six were Chinese-medium schools. It was interesting to note the children's reactions to both language and culture.

Apart from singing, other activities included the teaching of traditional dance-movements associated with the songs, playing the tunes on the recorder, free dramatization, and where possible, accompaniment with traditional instruments. Written feedback was obtained through questionnaires. The reactions of the schoolchildren to the songs were gauged both quantitatively through responses to statements using a Likert scale, and qualitatively based on their answers to open-ended questions.

I would like to highlight the responses to three of the open-ended questions posed.

1. Do you feel that Kenyah songs are suitable for teaching in class/or for performance at school events? Compare them with the composed songs in the existing KBSR books.
2. Choose two songs that you particularly like and explain why you like them.
3. What is your opinion on Kenyah traditional multipart singing, for example, is it easy to learn/are the songs effective as teaching material for harmony in schools?

The answers to Questions 1 and 2 were analysed by coding them into various categories. Some interesting trends emerge, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Coding of responses in Section B, Questions 1 and 2 (Chong 2013, 258-259)

		Wording of responses
1	Attractive melody (84 responses)	<i>like the tune; interesting melody; very sweet melody; very pleasing to the ears; very attractive rhythm; very attractive melody; very good tune; pretty tune</i>
2	Enjoyable (44 responses)	<i>enjoyable; entertaining; very enjoyable; makes me happy; gladdens my heart; alleviates my boredom</i>
3	Soothing/peaceful (20 responses)	<i>soothes my heart; soothes me; calms my thoughts; peaceful; gentle melody</i>
4	Movements (15 responses)	<i>like the dance movements</i>
5	Harmony (17 responses)	<i>has a descant; chance to learn two-part song</i>
6	Lyrics (15 responses)	<i>lyrics very interesting; new language; very meaningful</i>
7	Easy (23 responses)	<i>easy to sing; easy to memorize; short melodies</i>

The answers revealed an unusual maturity, a realisation on their part that the musical content of the songs was different, and the textual content more substantial from the composed KBSR songs. Considering their age (8 –11 years) the children were insightful, showing a real appreciation of the characteristics of Kenyah melody. A surprising observation was that, in schools where the more challenging, sentimental songs were taught, these were preferred over the simpler songs, previously thought more suitable for younger children. From my experience in SK Ong Tiang Swee, and observations at other schools, the children not only learnt the melodies and memorised the lyrics, they sang these nostalgic songs with nuance and sensitivity.

In response to Question 3, 56% of those agreed that it was easy to learn the harmony in Kenyah songs. Only 20% thought it difficult/rather difficult, while 4% suggested that it was “easy with training”. A significant number volunteered the descriptor “beautiful” to describe the harmony, showing their appreciation of its aesthetic value. Even though most had never sung in parts before, a majority considered Kenyah multipart singing to be achievable, if challenging, and a considerable number recognised its inherent beauty.

Conclusion

The musical value of Kenyah songs resides in their melodic, rhythmic and harmonic structure. As teaching materials, they serve the dual purpose of illustrating musical concepts and the characteristics of a specific Asian folk tradition. They are unusual in that they display multipart, homophonic harmony, where the subsidiary voice has distinct melodic interest. The song-texts present a rich reservoir of teaching-resources across disciplines such as the social sciences and environmental studies. The implications for music education are many, and their use as teaching materials in schools, despite the unfamiliar culture and language, has been shown to be not only feasible, but a timely addition to the existing repertoire

When I embarked on this wonderful adventure in 1996, a journey inspired by the Kodály philosophy, I did not imagine that it would last over twenty years and lead me to such a rich treasure of songs. I still maintain contact with these musically inventive people and hope to continue transcribing their songs and share them with the world.

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AUDIO AND VIDEO EXAMPLES (copyright Chong Pek Lin)

Title	Date	Performers	Details
Audio-clip 1: <i>Mudung Ina</i>	January 2006	ITE Batu Lintang students	1m 22s 660 KB
Audio-clip 2: <i>Lane</i> version 1 (Baram)	June 1996	residents of Long Selatong	1m 06s 2.8 MB
Audio-clip 3: <i>Ilun Kuai</i>	May 2013	ITE Batu Lintang students	1m 13s 12.3 MB
Audio-clip 4: <i>Det diet</i> (Baram version)	January 2006	ITE Batu Lintang students	47s 383 KB
Video-clip 1: <i>Mudung Ina</i> https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MTXBarPIZBM	December 1996	residents of Kampung Perpindahan, Marudi	
Video-clip 2: <i>Lane</i> version 1 (Baram) https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCw1uI_1Tw4PCw-N2L3KDbQ	December 1996	residents of Long Moh	34 s
Video-clip 3: <i>Ilun Kuai</i> https://youtu.be/Pcd5YlluG0	February 2009	residents of Long Moh	43s
Video-clip 4 : <i>Chut Tunyang</i> https://youtu.be/vgxevgZGRJA	February 2009	residents of Long Moh	39s
Video-clip 5: <i>Chut Tunyang</i> (stage performance) https://youtu.be/zK4_s4Hc7TM	November 2017	ITE Batu Lintang students	36s