

Malaysian Music Culture in World Music

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Abstract: In recent years, various public events in Malaysia have contributed to an image of “mystery” projected to the outside world. Furthermore, due to limited domestic focus and research on various aspects of Malay culture, the Malay ethnicity remains relatively obscure in the global perspective. Our understanding of the cultural characteristics, ethnic traits, and national spirit of the Malay population remains superficial. These factors heighten our curiosity about this “familiar yet unfamiliar” neighboring culture. This paper examines language, religion, and musical culture to better comprehend the unique charm of Malay music and its significant role in world music, providing theoretical support for further understanding.

Keywords: World Music, Malaysia, Mak Yong, Multicultural Fusion.

1. INTRODUCTION

Malay culture has been renowned for centuries, yet in recent years, various unexpected public events in Malaysia have contributed to a sense of “mystery” projected to the external world. Additionally, limited academic research on Malaysian culture leaves it somewhat indistinct within international perspectives. Questions arise about the primary music cultures in Malaysia, their unique characteristics, and the ways these diverse, stylistically distinct cultural forms have fused together. While studies on Malaysian Chinese music have yielded substantial results, research on the music of Malaysia’s largest ethnic group—the Malays—remains in its early stages. Undoubtedly, investigating the music culture of Malaysia, situated in a distinctive geographic location, is both important and necessary. Accordingly, this study involved multiple field investigations in areas such as Kuala Lumpur, Malacca, Kelantan, Penang, Terengganu, and Sarawak. By visiting various Malay music groups, cultural centers, and museums, and through shared living and music-making with Malay people, this research aims to provide theoretical support for better understanding the unique charm of Malay music culture and its significant place within world music.

1.1 Malaysia: The Beautiful Island Nation at the “Crossroads” of Southeast Asia

Situated at the maritime crossroads where the Indian and Pacific Oceans converge, Malaysia is a beautiful island nation that was once a critical point on China’s ancient Maritime Silk Road and the first stop for Chinese travelers venturing southeastward. Located between 1° and 7° N latitude and 97° and 120° E longitude, Malaysia is strategically positioned as a crucial maritime hub in Southeast Asia, alongside countries such as Singapore, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Brunei. Since ancient times, Malaysia has served as a vital node for East-West air and sea traffic and international trade, making it one of the earliest and most frequented countries for overseas trade and migration. Geographically, Malaysia is situated just north of the equator, with no distinct seasonal changes, high temperatures, and significant rainfall year-round. Temperature variation remains minimal, with average temperatures between 26°C and 30°C, and the rainy season occurs from October to March. The abundant rain and ample sunlight enable Malaysia to retain its lush, vibrant tropical scenery throughout the year. Its advantageous geographical position and rich mineral resources have long earned Malaysia the title of “Golden Khersonese” (Andaya & Andaya, 2010).



Figure 1: Map of Malaysia’s Unique Geographical Position

(Source: https://news.sohu.com/a/796188976_120086959)

Malaysia’s total land area is comparable to China’s Yunnan Province (330,345 square kilometers), and its total population is akin to that of Guizhou Province (32 million). Malay is the official language, English is widely spoken, and Mandarin is also commonly used. Islam is the national religion, with Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism, and Christianity also practiced. Malaysia’s primary population groups consist of Malays, Chinese, and Indians. According to the latest statistics from 2021, Malays account for 70% of the population, Chinese for 22.7%, Indians for 6.6%, and other ethnicities for 0.7% (Huajing Industry Research Institute, 2022). Malaysia is composed of thirteen states and thirty-two ethnic groups, making it a quintessential multi-ethnic and multicultural nation. National holidays include the Muslim celebration of Eid, the birthday of the reigning Malay monarch, and Malaysia's National Day; Chinese New Year and the Mid-Autumn Festival for the Chinese community; and Deepavali, Thaipusam, and Vesak Day for the Indian community.



Figure 2: Map of the Thirteen Malaysian States

(Source: <https://www.cifnews.com/article/61209/>)

Beyond its favorable geographic location, Malaysia is blessed with abundant natural resources, making it a land of plenty. Neighboring tropical countries such as Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand frequently endure natural disasters such as typhoons, earthquakes, tsunamis, and volcanic eruptions. Although geographically adjacent, Malaysia experiences a notably different fate. Historically, Malaysia has rarely suffered from severe earthquakes, tsunamis, or other catastrophic natural events. Even typhoons that frequently devastate the western Pacific and the South China Sea seldom affect Malaysia, which generally remains peaceful and safe. Malaysia even escaped the disastrous tsunami following the 2004 Aceh earthquake, which severely impacted Thailand, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, India, and many other nations. Scientists

speculate that Malaysia's fortunate natural stability may stem from its two land masses lying outside the Pacific Ring of Fire, shielding it from many natural calamities. Consequently, Malaysia is often regarded as a "land of fortune".

2. A MICROCOSM OF A "COLORFUL WORLD": MALAYSIA'S MULTICULTURAL FUSION

The Malaysian government implements a policy emphasizing "Malay ethnic primacy with collective development alongside other ethnic groups", which serves as a framework for Malaysia's multicultural fusion of diverse ethnicities, languages, and religious beliefs. Besides the three primary ethnic groups, Malaysia's western region hosts numerous minority groups, including the Iban, Bidayuh, Melanau, Kayan, Kenyah, Krayan, Kayan, Ulu, Punan, and Punan in Sarawak; and the Kadazan, Dusun, Lun Bawang, and Murut in Sabah. Additionally, a unique hybrid group known as the Baba and Nyonya—descendants of intermarriage between Malays and Chinese—reflects this multicultural heritage. The term "Baba" refers to men and "Nyonya" to women. From as early as the 15th century, significant Chinese migration from southern China (especially Fujian and Guangdong) to areas now known as Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore led to extensive cultural exchange and integration with local Malay communities, forming the distinctive Baba-Nyonya culture. Undoubtedly, this hybrid culture merges the essence of Chinese and Malay traditions and serves as a testament to Malaysia's multicultural fusion.

2.1 The "Mosaic" of Language Culture: A Reflection of Malaysia's Multicultural Fusion

As a nation of diverse ethnicities and cultures, Malaysia exhibits a mosaic of linguistic diversity. Language is often called a "mirror of human culture", and in Malaysia, Malay serves as the national and official language, while minority groups in East Malaysia use their native languages. Tamil is widely used among Indians, while Mandarin serves as an essential tool for communication within the Malaysian Chinese community. Each of the three main ethnic groups thus maintains its linguistic identity. Beyond these primary languages, the country hosts English, Thai, Hindi, Urdu, Tamil, and other languages, alongside dialects such as the Kelantan dialect (a distinct Malay variant), Javanese, Hokkien, Cantonese, Hakka, and numerous minority languages in East Malaysia.

Historically colonized by multiple foreign powers, Malaysia has seen English become a pivotal language for interethnic communication. Because of the long-standing coexistence of various ethnic groups, Malaysians not only speak their primary language but often know at least two other ethnic or national languages, creating an environment of linguistic absorption and influence. Malay, with its extensive history, reflects Malaysia's fluctuating historical developments across the Malay Peninsula, which have endowed it with a uniquely inclusive and comprehensive character (Gong, Jiang, Liu, & Ge, 2012). Today, Malay's simplicity and efficiency have made it a vital tool for uniting diverse ethnic groups. By the end of the 20th century, most Malaysians aged 7 to 30 had received formal Malay language education. Although Malay continues to permeate other ethnic languages, the linguistic diversity among indigenous groups still renders the Malay Peninsula and Borneo dynamic regions for language research (Andaya & Andaya, 2010, p. 131). For instance, while consonant reduplication is rare in ancient Malay, its occurrence increased under Arabic influence. Additionally, to convey religious sentiment, the aspiration sound "h" was emphasized in Malay (Gong, Jiang, Liu, & Ge, 2012, p. 136). Sanskrit, Arabic, and English have all contributed to the formation and evolution of the Malay language.

From the late 18th to the early 20th centuries, large numbers of Chinese laborers were brought to the Malay Peninsula as indentured workers. Many of these laborers, hailing from the coastal areas of Fujian and Guangdong, occupied the lowest levels of society and adapted by blending their native languages with Malay. Over time, Malay absorbed a significant number of Chinese loanwords, particularly from the Hokkien and Cantonese dialects. Currently, Malay includes hundreds of loanwords from Chinese, covering everyday vocabulary, food, commerce, place names, and cultural expressions. Known for their diligence and linguistic versatility, Malaysian Chinese not only excel in Malay, English, and Mandarin but can also seamlessly switch between Cantonese, Teochew, Hokkien, and Hakka. Some even mix languages in intriguing ways: incorporating English while speaking Mandarin, interjecting Chinese phrases into Malay conversations, or mixing dialects with Mandarin, forming what could be termed a "linguistic mosaic".

Interestingly, at traditional cultural ceremonies in Malaysia, it is common to invite a Malay shaman to officiate. These shamans often incorporate multilingual chants, using Malay, Tamil, and Mandarin (Cantonese or Hokkien) in their incantations. This practice of "multilingual usage" and "language blending" is not only a cultural heritage but also a unique phenomenon emerging from the long-term contact, integration, and interaction among Malaysia's multiethnic

groups. Today, terms like "Gong Xi Fa Cai" (congratulations on wealth), "hongbao" (red envelope), and "ta pao" (takeout) from Chinese culture have become widely recognized among Malay and Indian communities, illustrating how cultural and linguistic coexistence has given rise to vibrant artistic expressions. These facets vividly embody Malaysia's multicultural fusion.

2.2 A Sanctuary for the Soul: Malaysia's Religious Diversity

According to the *Federal Constitution of Malaysia*, Islam is the country's official religion; however, under conditions that do not challenge the dignity and status of Islam, other ethnic groups are free to practice their own beliefs. Consequently, in addition to Islam, Malaysia is home to a range of religious practices, including Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, Sikhism, Hinduism, and indigenous beliefs. Among Chinese Malaysians, Buddhism and Taoism are predominant, alongside Catholicism and Christianity. Chinese Malaysians have religious freedom, but if they marry Malays, they must undergo baptism to become Muslims and follow Islamic teachings. Among Indians, Hinduism, Sikhism, and Hindu-derived beliefs are common. The constitution mandates that Malays in West Malaysia must practice Islam, while in East Malaysia (Sabah and Sarawak), indigenous groups retain freedom of belief. Although Islam is the national religion, Malaysia's agricultural foundation and traditional influences have led to the coexistence of animistic and indigenous beliefs, particularly in rural East Malaysia and parts of the eastern coast of West Malaysia, where some individuals simultaneously observe Islamic and animistic practices.

Malaysia's multiethnic coexistence has fostered a unique environment in which multiple religious fields exist in tandem. For instance, Buddhist Chinese communities worship at Buddhist temples, including notable sites such as the Guanyin Temple and Sam Poh Tong in Kuala Lumpur, Cheng Hoon Teng Temple in Malacca, and Kek Lok Si and Bo Yun Temples in Penang. Chinese temples often feature impressive architecture and are commonly regarded as cultural landmarks. Another characteristic of Chinese temples is the blending of Buddhism and Taoism, with deities like Fu De Zheng Shen, the Jade Emperor, and Buddha figures such as Sakyamuni and Guanyin often housed in the same temple. Indians, predominantly from the Tamil community in southern India, generally practice Hinduism, with worship centered on deities such as Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. On the streets of Malaysia, one can find places of worship for the three major groups—Malay, Chinese, and Indian—highlighting the coexistence of religious traditions and Malaysia's multicultural reality.



Figure 3: Muslim place of worship: Kelantan Mosque

(Source: Author, August 3, 2024, taken in Kelantan, Malaysia, showcasing the abundant mosques.)



Figure 4: Chinese place of worship: Kek Lok Si Temple, Penang

(Source: Author, August 12, 2024, taken in Penang, Malaysia. Kek Lok Si, located on Penang's White Crane Hill, is the largest Chinese Buddhist temple in Malaysia, spanning 12 hectares and known as one of Southeast Asia's most grandiose temples.)



Figure 5: Indian place of worship: Batu Caves, Selangor

(Source: Author, August 15, 2024, taken in Selangor, Malaysia. Batu Caves is a sacred Hindu site where, during the annual Thaipusam festival in late January to early February, devout Hindus carry statues and sing religious hymns as they journey into the caves for worship, with as many as 300,000 participants.)



Figure 6: Former Christian place of worship: Red House Church, Malacca

(Source: Image provided by Malaysian Chinese friend Wang Renzhao. Built in 1753 under Dutch colonial rule, the Red House Church in Malacca originally served as a Christian and administrative center. Today it is a museum and a significant local tourist attraction.)

In conclusion, Malaysia's unique geographical location, along with its specific historical and ethnic circumstances, has led to the influence of four major cultural systems—Chinese, Indian, Arab, and Western European—over time. As foreign immigration continues, these cultural elements have flourished and evolved within Malaysia, creating a space where diverse religious beliefs coexist harmoniously, highlighting Malaysia's overarching "multicultural fusion".

3. VIBRANT TRADITIONAL MUSICAL CULTURE: A RICH SPIRITUAL NOURISHMENT FOR THE MALAY PEOPLE

The Malay ethnic group is known for its strong affinity for music and dance. The agrarian lifestyle of traditional Malay society has nurtured a simple yet profound ethnic character, along with a rich diversity of traditional artistic expressions. Malay performing arts often combine dance and singing, blending music with movement in lively, collective celebrations, where music serves as an essential "lubricant" for these cultural activities.

3.1 Malay Integrated Art—*Makyong* Theatre

Mak Yong, spelled *Makyong* or *Makyung* in Malay, is an ancient court theater form that originated in Thailand's Pattani region over 400 years ago and was introduced to the eastern coast of Peninsular Malaysia. Performed in the ancient dialect of Pattani-Kelantan, *Makyong* is a comprehensive art form that combines ritual, vocal music, instrumental music, dance, drama, and comedy (Rahimidin & Sutung, 2011, p. 4). Based on the purpose of performance, *Makyong* can be classified into two types: one for entertainment and the other, *main puteri*, which is used for psychological healing. Both forms of *Makyong* maintain an opening ritual element rooted in animistic beliefs, giving the art a mystical aura in addition to its theatrical content. *Makyong* theatre is Malaysia's first UNESCO-designated Intangible Cultural Heritage and is a treasured cultural asset. UNESCO's dedication statement describes it as "the essence of Malay cultural artistry, preserved and passed down orally, through imitation, or other methods. Created collectively by the Malay people, *Makyong* reflects the rich inner world and cultural characteristics of the Malay community" (Rahimidin & Sutung, 2011, p. 1).



Figure 7: Malaysia’s First UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage Certificate (Rahimudin & Sutung, 2011, p. 2)

Makyong theatre expert Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof describes it as a “comprehensive art form that merges ritual, dance, vocal and instrumental music, song, and storytelling, incorporating both improvisational and non-improvisational elements” (Yousof, 1976, p. 2). Malaysian Chinese composer Yu Jiahe notes, “*Makyong* theatre is a Malay musical drama imbued with religious significance” (Yu, 1997). Chinese scholar Professor Luo Yifeng writes, “*Makyong* is a traditional northern Malay folk theater. Although it has foreign (Thai) cultural influences, it has long been Malay-ized and localized” (Luo & Zhong, 2002).



Figure 8: Basic Instrument Configuration of the Makyong Orchestra

(Source: Provided by Cik Radzi, head of the “Golden Deer” *Makyong* Theatre Troupe at the Kelantan State Cultural Center, Malaysia.)

Instruments from left to right: *canang*, large and small *gendang* drums, *tetawak* hanging gongs, and *rebab*.



Figure 9: Makyong Theatre Live Performance Scene

(Source: Image from renowned Malaysian *Makyong* actor Rosnan. The high-crowned figure in the image represents the *berjungan* (king), portrayed by Rosnan.)

Malay people commonly perceive a *Makyong* performance as a captivating journey for both the eyes and ears. The engaging plot twists, graceful court dances, humorous clown performances, and the orchestra's live, improvised accompaniment leave a lasting impression on audiences. Music, as an essential component of *Makyong* theatre, represents a deep-seated symbol of Malay folk culture and stands as an artistic masterpiece shaped by the dynamic fusion and interaction of Malaysia's multicultural influences.

3.2 The Witty and Humorous Malay Song and Dance Performance—*Dikir Barat*

Dikir Barat is a traditional Malay song and dance form that integrates music, dance, and poetry, and is highly popular among the people of Kelantan. Originating from Malay villages in southern Thailand, the term "Barat" means "west" and "Dikir" refers to "religious chanting". *Dikir Barat* performances are commonly held during harvest seasons and family gatherings in Malay communities. The repertoire of *Dikir Barat* songs includes newly composed pieces as well as adaptations of Malay pantun (poetry), allowing *Dikir Barat* to serve as a medium for educating audiences, discussing important issues, and conveying social commentary with a satirical tone.



Figure 10: Malay Dikir Barat Performance

(Source: <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1809347711296169128&wfr=spider&for=pc>)

The roles in *Dikir Barat* performances are typically divided into four types: the conductor, lead singer, chorus, and musicians. In addition to individual performances, *Dikir Barat* may also take the form of a competition between two teams. In such instances, the lead singers from each team exchange verses in a call-and-response format, followed by the chorus providing vocal support or harmonization. This structure requires a strong sense of collective cohesion, as well as musical skill and quick reflexes from all participants.

Dikir Barat performances are usually conducted in a seated formation, either in a circle or in a single row, with participants sitting on the floor. The chorus members often follow the lead singer with synchronized rhythmic dance movements using their arms, hands, and upper body. Due to its improvised, continuous rhyming verses that often contain satire and social criticism, *Dikir Barat* is considered by Malays as a competitive and intellectually stimulating traditional art form, widely enjoyed by the Malay populace.

3.3 Dynamic Traditional Malay Dances—*Joget* and *Silat*

Joget is a group dance popular among the Malay community, bearing a close resemblance in steps and rhythm to the Latin Cha-Cha. With its lively musical tempo and easy-to-learn movements, *Joget* is highly entertaining and is typically performed at the end of events or celebrations. Guests and visitors are often invited to join in, adding to the joyful and energetic atmosphere.

In addition, *Pencak Silat*, commonly referred to as *Silat*, is a unique Malay dance form that incorporates elements of martial arts, including defensive and offensive moves. However, *Silat* has evolved within Malay society to be primarily appreciated as a dance rather than a combat form. The defensive and aggressive elements have been artistically softened by Malay choreographers, enhancing the performance aspect while reducing its martial function. Today, Malay people practice *Silat* not only for self-cultivation but also as a way to appreciate the beauty of traditional Malay performing arts.



Figure 11: Silat, the Malay Martial Dance

(Source: https://www.sohu.com/a/350426737_237753)

3.4 The Enchanting Malay Shadow Play—*Wayang Kulit*

Wayang Kulit, or shadow play, is an essential traditional art form in Malay culture. This intricate art combines language, literature, performance, music, and visual art, and is primarily popular along the eastern coast of Peninsular Malaysia. *Wayang Kulit* puppets are typically crafted from animal skin. Small size puppets are made of sheepskin and take about one day to make, while large size puppets are made of cowhide and take about two to three days. Malay *Wayang Kulit* stories are often adapted from the Indian epic *Mahabharata*, lending the characters distinctive Indian-inspired features.

In performance, *Wayang Kulit* puppets are mounted on a banana trunk placed behind a screen, with light projecting from behind the puppets to cast their “shadows” on the screen. The storytelling is orchestrated by a single *Tok Dalang*, or master puppeteer, who may operate up to 45 puppets by himself. An intriguing element of *Wayang Kulit* is its live musical accompaniment, where musicians behind the screen play improvised music tailored to the unfolding story. These

musicians not only play their instruments but occasionally assist with narration, enhancing the storytelling. The *Dalang* brings the story to life under the lights, leading the audience into a whimsical, fairytale-like night. The *Dalang's* masterful narration, paired with the evocative Malay music, paints a vivid picture of Southeast Asia's tropical ambiance.



Figure 12: Malay Wayang Kulit Performance

(Source: https://www.sohu.com/a/162495266_411871)

3.5 A Collective Innovation of Malaysian Chinese—The Twenty-Four Festival Drums

The Twenty-Four Festival Drums, a creation of Malaysia's Chinese community, are inspired by China's traditional twenty-four solar terms. This drumming ensemble merges the art of Guangdong lion drums with traditional Chinese calligraphy, creating a distinctly Chinese musical expression. The drum formations in these performances are full of Chinese cultural symbolism, often depicting actions like spring planting or autumn harvesting. Notably, the Twenty-Four Festival Drums do not use a set drum score; instead, the drummers improvise during performances, adding to the ensemble's openness and capacity for continual evolution. This drumming art form embodies the Malaysian Chinese community's preservation and innovation of Chinese drum culture and serves as a meaningful way for younger generations to connect with and promote traditional Chinese heritage.



Figure 13: The Twenty-Four Festival Drums

(Source: <https://news.qq.com/rain/a/20220602A0869R00>)

Art arises from life, and Malaysia's long history of multiethnic and multicultural coexistence has resulted in a diverse and vibrant artistic landscape. These traditional art forms collectively reflect the colorful and multifaceted nature of Malay arts, where music functions as an essential "lubricant", serving as a vital source of spiritual nourishment for the local people and as an expressive medium for their cultural identity.

4. CONCLUSION

In Malaysia, one can find nearly all the world's major civilizations represented: the Malay majority, predominantly Muslim, embodies the essence of Arab civilization through Islamic faith; the economically influential Chinese community upholds Confucian values as representatives of traditional Chinese culture; the veneration of Shiva among Indians signifies the grandeur of ancient Indian civilization; and Western Christian civilization finds substantial support among certain non-Malay groups (Kang, 2009). This culturally diverse fusion has enriched both the content and form of Malaysian music culture, giving it a significant position within world music. As time progresses, Malaysian music culture continues to evolve. On one hand, traditional musical elements are being better preserved and passed on, with many musicians dedicated to exploring and organizing traditional Malay music to ensure its continuity. On the other hand, foreign musical elements are gradually integrating into traditional Malaysian music, allowing it to maintain its unique character while adapting to contemporary aesthetics and demands.

Malaysia's strategic geographic location, profound historical roots, and supportive cultural environment grant it distinct advantages not shared by other nations. These factors play a significant role in shaping the cultural characteristics of this beautiful tropical nation, the speed of its cultural exchange with the world, and the direction and intensity of its intercultural interactions. In essence, Malay music culture, with its distinctive melodies, heartfelt lyrics, and diverse modes of expression, is cherished by the Malay people. It serves as a vital "bridge" for connecting different Malay ethnic groups and fostering emotional bonds with people worldwide.

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