

# Between Music, Dance and Ritual: Performing Arts at the Borneo Research Council Conference

The Seventh Biennial International Conference of the Borneo Research Council (BRC) focused on issues in development in twenty-first-century Borneo and for the first time featured two major panels on the performing arts, in addition to a separate session of individual papers. Inevitably, the change and continued relevance of the traditional art forms of Borneo were among the issues discussed by a number of specialists in the performing arts who had come from Borneo, Malaysia, Europe, and the USA. It is to be hoped that at future BRC Conferences this forum will also feature local Dayak researchers.



Young students at the Dayak Cultural Foundation practising traditional Iban women's dance (*ngajat indu*) in modern slacks, while manipulating woven *pua kumbu* cloths.

By Clara Brakel & Patricia Matusky

The first panel entitled 'Between Music, Dance and Ritual: Some Aspects of Kulintang in Sabah', focused on the *kulintang* gong-chime of Sabah. The four papers presented in this panel were the result of a long-term study of the *kulintang* (from 1998 to 2000) to examine its repertory, music practices, distribution, function, and use in select Sabahan and Filipino societies. Jacqueline Pugh-Kitingan of Universiti Malaysia Sabah showed the widespread distribution of the *kulintang* among ethnic groups throughout the state of Sabah, with particular reference to Dusunic cultures, while Sunetra Fernando from the University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, spoke about the heterogeneity of music practices and repertoires played on the *kulintang* along the east coast of Sabah. The use of the *kulintang* in relation to dance in village and court contexts was discussed by Mohammed Anis of the University of Malaya. Finally, Hanafi Hussin, a doctoral student in theatre at the University of Malaya, reported on his research on a spirit medium ritual (the *moginum* of the Bobohizan) and function of the *kulintang* music in that ceremony among the Tatana ethnic group in the area of Kuala Penyu, Sabah. While the summaries of this panel are published by the BRC, the in-depth individual studies will be published as a collection by the group of researchers concerned.

The second panel on music and dance, entitled 'Preservation-Modernization-Reinvention in the Performing Arts of Borneo', was meant to begin examining current trends in the performing arts of Borneo. Five presenters explored the state of music and dance performances in traditional settings, academic contexts, and public settings such as those arranged by the culture ministries, hotels, and private organizations. With a variety of viewpoints and approaches, the speakers

discussed examples of innovation of the traditional arts in Borneo, addressing modernization versus preservation in the music, songs, and dances of Sarawak and Sabah.

First, Patricia Matusky of Central Michigan University set out some of the basic issues of the panel in a paper entitled 'The Significance of Preservation: To Save or Not to Save?', illustrating why preservation and documentation are imperative when considering research in the traditional arts. The Dayak Cultural Foundation Ethnic Orchestra, a recent example of 'modernization' in the sense of incorporating Western influences into originally Dayak music and dance, was discussed by Clara Brakel of Leiden University. Jacqueline Pugh-Kitingan showed various, more or less satisfactory examples of adaptation of traditional dance and music forms in Sabah and Mhd. Anis Md. Nor used a live demonstration to show how traditional Iban dance patterns may change in various contexts. This very lively panel ended with an example of the adaptation of the long-dance-song (*belian dadu*), often considered one of the most

attractive musical genres of the Kenyah communities in Sarawak, for urban audiences and students in government schools and institutions, by Chong Pek Lin, music lecturer at Maktab Perguruan Batu Lintang, Kuching, Sarawak.

The session of individual papers on performing arts encompassed both music and theatre. Nur Afifah Vanitha Abdullah of the Universiti Malaysia Sarawak spoke about the *bangsawan* theatrical genre in Sarawak. While little information exists on the history of this genre, an elucidation of the roots of *bangsawan* in peninsular Malaysia and its dissemination throughout Southeast Asia might provide more research possibilities. Two papers dealt with tube zithers and gong-chimes in Sabah. Jacqueline Pugh-Kitingan explained terminology and performance techniques on the *tongkungon* tube zither and the relationship to the hanging-gong orchestras from the Kadazandusun Culture of Tambunan in Sabah. In contrast, Jedol Dayou, also of the Universiti Malaysia Sabah, offered a technical description of the acoustic properties of the *kulintang* gong-chime of Sabah.

The general feeling was that continued relevance of the traditional art forms in the more urban regions of Borneo was especially pressing in today's world of global communication, modern technology, and easy access to influences from the Western world. Therefore, presenters of performing arts papers at this conference intend to continue and expand the discussion at the next BRC Conference in 2004 and beyond. <

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Young music students at the Dayak Cultural Foundation practising with traditional Iban mouth-organs (*engkerurai*). On the table in front of them are two mouth-organs (*engkrurai*) and two one-stringed fiddles (*serunai*).

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