

Sumazau popular music of the Kadazandusun: Qualitative analysis of song forms and arrangements (1970s - 1980s)

Elvin Dainal[#], Kenny David Yuntalla, Andrew Poninting

Academy of Arts and Creative Technology, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Jalan UMS, 88400 Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, MALAYSIA.

[#] Corresponding author. E-Mail: elvindainal@ums.edu.my; Tel: 016-8135078

ABSTRACT Sumazau music has traditionally related to gong ensemble performance that accompany the Sumazau dance during sacred rituals of the Kadazandusun ethnic group in Sabah, Malaysia. Following the establishment of the Crown Colony of North Borneo in 1946, the function of Sumazau music gradually shifted from ritualistic to secular, becoming a key element in Kadazandusun popular music. Despite its cultural significance, the identity of Sumazau popular music remains underexplored, particularly from a musicological perspective, due to limited scholarly resources. This study reveals that Kadazandusun popular songs in the Sumazau rhythm from the 1970s and 1980s predominantly employ repetitive song forms and simple arrangements that effectively preserve and transmit the essence of traditional Sumazau music into popular domain. Using a qualitative interpretive approach and audio content analysis of eight iconic Sumazau-style songs (five from the 1970s and three from the 1980s), the study applies the Songwriting Cycle Theory to examine musical form and arrangement. The analysis shows that repetitive structures such as AAA and AAAA are dominant, with straightforward yet impactful arrangements that reflect the traditional Sumazau aesthetic. This research contributes to the academic discourse on ethnic music transformation by emphasizing the role of musical form and arrangement in shaping the modern identity of Sumazau popular music. It highlights the importance of preserving traditional elements while adapting to contemporary cultural contexts.

KEYWORDS: Sumazau popular music; Kadazandusun; Musicology; Audio content analysis.

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INTRODUCTION

Sumazau refers to a traditional dance of the Kadazandusun community in Sabah, which has been recognised as an important element of the ethnic group's cultural heritage. Originally, this dance was considered sacred, performed during rituals closely linked with rice cultivation, weddings, and various other customary ceremonies (Sukirman, 2020; Hussin *et al.*, 2018; Matusky & Beng, 2017). Beyond its ritual function, Sumazau was also performed in social settings such as feasts or festivals, where gong ensembles accompanied the dance as a symbol of gratitude and joy (Pugh-Kitingan, 2017).

Over time, particularly after the establishment of the Crown Colony of North Borneo in 1946, the function of Sumazau music began to shift. The influence of modern technologies such as radio, along with the introduction of Western instruments especially the electric guitar ushered in new performance styles (Pugh-Kitingan, 2019). Gong ensembles no longer dominated exclusively; instead, they were integrated with modern electric bands. This change became especially evident during wedding ceremonies, where modern bands were placed at the front of the house to entertain guests, while gongs were played at the back, primarily for the elders. This transition marked a shift from traditional musical structures to more hybrid forms and arrangements, blending local elements with modern popular influences.

Sumazau music remains a vital symbol of Kadazandusun culture and is often connected with traditional rituals and celebrations. However, beginning in the 1960s, it began to evolve into a form

of entertainment and popular music. Previous studies have largely focused on its ritual functions and ethnomusicological aspects (Pugh-Kitingan, 2004), with limited attention given to song form and musical arrangement. Contemporary research indicates that the transformation of traditional music in Sabah has also been influenced by commercialisation, music education, and new media (Hussin, 2023; Simeon & Pugh-Kitingan, 2021). Therefore, this study aims to analyse how song form and musical arrangement in Sumazau popular music contribute to shaping its identity and reinforcing its position within Kadazandusun popular culture.

Nevertheless, Kadazandusun popular music continues to retain key characteristics rooted in the *gong Sumazau* of Tambunan and *sompogogungan* of Penampang (Pugh-Kitingan, 2004). As explained by Hussin *et al.* (2018), many Sumazau-style songs from the 1970s and 1980s were composed by musicians from Tambunan, yet they maintained the rhythmic patterns of Penampang as a core identity. This demonstrates how relatively simple song forms, when crafted with modern musical arrangements, can preserve traditional values while appealing to contemporary tastes.

One of the key figures in this development was the late Datuk John Gaisah (1955–1981). Through his compositions, he successfully modernised Sumazau music arrangements by incorporating electric bands and introducing new vocal styles. Despite his short life, his influence left a legacy in shaping the identity of Kadazandusun popular music (Pugh-Kitingan, 2019). Following his success in the 1976 Bintang RTM competition, John Gaisah is often regarded as a pioneer who brought Kadazandusun music into the mainstream (Borneo Post Online, 2012; Daily Express, 2012).

Popular Music

Popular music refers to forms of music that are created, produced, and distributed for widespread public enjoyment. It is typically commercial in nature, easily accessible, and characterised by features that quickly capture the listener's attention (Frith, 1996). Popular music often emphasises entertainment and mass cultural identity and is heavily influenced by developments in recording technology and broadcast media (Middleton, 1990). Terminologically, popular music differs from traditional music, which is passed down through generations, and from art or classical music, which tends to focus on aesthetic complexity and cultural prestige. However, popular music is often hybrid in nature, borrowing elements from various musical traditions, including folk, classical, and rapidly evolving global music forms (Tagg, 1982).

The main characteristics of popular music include its commercial orientation, produced for the music market and industry, and its accessibility, with simple, memorable melodies, harmonies, and lyrics. It is also mass-oriented, widely disseminated through media such as radio, television, the internet, and digital streaming platforms. Additionally, popular music often serves as a medium for expressing the social identities of generations or subcultures, and it evolves dynamically in response to trends, technologies, and audience preferences (Frith, 1996; Middleton, 1990). In academic contexts, popular music is not merely viewed as entertainment, but also as a social, economic, and cultural phenomenon that significantly influences lifestyles and human interaction.

Research Problem

According to Hussin *et al.* (2018), modern pop music recordings released in compact disc (CD) format continue to retain the Sumazau rhythm as a core element, although it has been reinterpreted by modern electronic instruments. This fusion produces musical arrangements that blend traditional elements with contemporary nuances, allowing Sumazau characteristics to remain recognisable despite new performance styles. Benedick argues that composers should be more creative in producing Sumazau-style songs, including in other languages, to enable their form and arrangement

to penetrate international markets (Utusan Borneo Online, 2019). However, a contrasting view is presented by Abu Bakar Ellah, cited by Joseph (2019), who notes that some new-generation KDM (Kadazandusun and Murut) music groups are increasingly abandoning traditional arrangement styles, resulting in songs that no longer consistently retain the Sumazau rhythmic form. This situation highlights a shift in the identity of Kadazandusun popular music, particularly in terms of musical structure and arrangement strategies.

Traditionally, Sumazau music is synonymous with gong ensembles accompanying ritual dances. However, in the context of popular music, the form and arrangement of Sumazau-style songs remain underexplored academically, making its national identity difficult to define. Kementerian Kesenian dan Warisan (2005) has emphasised the need to develop a national music identity through creative experimentation rooted in local traditions. From a research perspective, documentation of traditional music notation and scores remain limited, as ethnic music learning often relies on oral memorisation methods. Therefore, analysis of song form and musical arrangement in Sumazau popular music is crucial for archiving, music education, and as a reference for future generations of artists.

Research Limitations

Barendregt *et al.* (2017) describe the period from the 1970s to the 1990s as the “Modern Ethnic” era, marked by the rise of ethnic pop influenced by cassette distribution, rural to urban migration, social class awareness, and gender articulation. The establishment of private recording studios such as Seh Huat Company around 1968 in Kampung Air, Kota Kinabalu, led to the production of thousands of Kadazandusun artist recordings under the Kinabalu Records label (Pugh-Kitingan, 2019). By the 1990s, digital technology enabled artists to set up their own studios in Tambunan and Penampang. For this study, the scope is limited to the 1970s and 1980s prior to the major shift to digital recording technology. Special emphasis is placed on the early analysis of song form and musical arrangement in Sumazau-style popular songs during this era.

This study seeks to explore the characteristics and evolution of Sumazau-style popular songs produced during the 1970s and 1980s. Specifically, it aims to investigate the structural song forms commonly employed in these works and to understand how these forms shaped the identity of Sumazau-inspired popular music during that era. Furthermore, the research examines the musical arrangements within these songs to determine how traditional Sumazau elements were fused with modern musical influences prevalent at the time, such as Western instrumentation and stylistic trends. By doing so, the study intends to identify the distinctive features of song structure and arrangement strategies that defined the production of Sumazau-style popular music prior to the advent of digital recording technologies. Ultimately, this analysis will provide insights into the creative processes and cultural negotiations that occurred in the hybridization of traditional and contemporary musical practices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Pugh-Kitingan (2019) observed a transformation in Kadazandusun music from traditional secular singing to the emergence of modern Sabah music. Initially, the Kadazandusun community had various forms of traditional vocal music such as ritual chants, *pantun*, *sinding*, and classical poetry. After World War II, the guitar emerged as an entertainment instrument, introducing a new form known as contemporary *sinding*, which fused traditional songs with electric band accompaniment. Interestingly, bands began to imitate traditional gong rhythms, whether the *sompogandangan* from Tambunan or the slower *sompogogungan* Sumazau rhythm from Penampang, eventually leading to the

term “Sumazau rhythm or Sumazau-style.” While this study details the cultural and instrumental transformation, it does not delve into how song form and musical arrangement were developed through this adaptation within the popular music framework.

Meanwhile, Hussin *et al.* (2018) emphasise the evolution of Penampang Sumazau music and dance from ritual function to secular entertainment. Their study discusses the use of traditional gong ensembles such as *sompogogungan* and their role in accompanying dance, highlighting the flexibility of Sumazau music to adapt to different contexts. However, the analysis focuses more on cultural function and dance choreography, without addressing the structure of songs and the form of Sumazau popular music in a modern context.

Sukirman (2012) focuses on three variations of the Sumazau dance from Penampang, Membakut, and Papar examining costumes, accessories, and movement styles. Her findings show that traditional gong functions persist alongside modern bands in festive events such as weddings. While this supports the continued influence of gongs in Kadazandusun popular music, the technical aspects of song form and musical arrangement remain unexplored.

In contrast, Poninting (2008) conducted a musicological analysis of Dusun popular songs by comparing works from two different eras. His analysis includes song form, motifs, harmony, instrumentation, and lyrics. Using music notation software, the researcher was able to identify musical structures in greater depth. Although his approach is closely aligned with this article, the focus remains general and does not specifically address Sumazau-style songs.

Additionally, Frith (1996) argues that popular music should be evaluated not only by sound but also by its narrative structure, with repetitive forms such as AAA and AABA making music more memorable. Simeon & Pugh-Kitingan (2021), in their study of Rungus children’s songs, highlight the importance of documenting traditional forms for heritage continuity. Boyle *et al.* (2022) explain that Malay popular music composition is influenced by a blend of traditional and modern elements, while Jerome *et al.* (2022) link ethnic music to identity formation. These findings reinforce the argument that musical form plays a vital role in constructing cultural narratives.

Although there are studies on ritual function, traditional instruments and ethnic music education in schools specific research on song form and musical arrangement in Sumazau popular music remains limited. Furthermore, recent studies (Jerome *et al.*, 2022) show a strong connection between ethnic popular music and identity formation, but do not deeply explore compositional form and structure. This study addresses that gap by focusing on the analysis of song form and musical arrangement in Sumazau popular music from the 1970s to 1980s.

Songwriting Cycle Theory

The main theoretical framework used in this study is Songwriting Cycle Theory, introduced by Kachulis (2003; 2004) through his book series *The Songwriter’s Workshop*. This theory is particularly relevant to ethnomusicological analysis because it highlights the dynamic interaction between melody, harmony, form, and lyrics. In Kadazandusun oral traditions, repetitive forms such as AAA and AABA are not only compositional devices but also cultural mechanisms for collective memory and identity. This makes the theory suitable for examining how Sumazau popular music preserved tradition while adapting to modern contexts, as its emphasis on cyclical interaction between melody, harmony, form, and lyrics mirrors the collective and iterative nature of Kadazandusun oral traditions. Repetitive forms such as AAA and AABA functioned as cultural mechanisms for memory and identity, reinforcing the suitability of this framework for ethnomusicological analysis. These

elements interact dynamically to produce a cohesive musical work. He emphasises that during the songwriting process, composers continuously move between these dimensions to create a balanced and expressive composition. However, only one key element will be highlighted in this study what is form, as it plays a central role in shaping the structure and flow of Sumazau popular music.

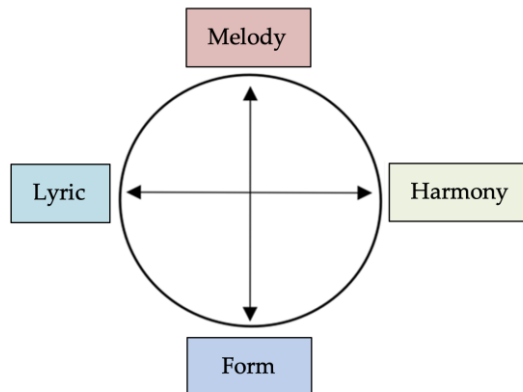


Figure 1. Theory of “Songwriting Cycle” (Kachulis, 2004;2003).

METHODOLOGY

Aligned with a qualitative interpretive design, this study employs audio and textual content analysis of the discography of Kadazandusun Sumazau-style songs from the 1970s to 1980s (Zhang & Kuo, 2001). The qualitative content analysis approach is a specialised technique for categorising and coding textual, audio, and visual data using a systematic coding scheme to interpret the meaning of qualitative data (Saunders, 2019; Scheier, 2014). According to Lerch (2012), audio content analysis can be classified into three categories: music transcription, performance analysis, and music identification and categorisation. Examples include key detection, fundamental frequency tracking, rhythm and tempo analysis, musical structure detection, and performance evaluation.

Following Leavy (2014), sampling in interpretive research may be descriptive, theoretical, or purposive. This study adopts purposive sampling, based on the principle that selecting the best cases yields the most relevant data, and that research outcomes are directly shaped by the chosen samples (Leavy, 2017; Patton, 2015; Morse, 2010). The sample for this study consists of eight (8) iconic Kadazandusun Sumazau-style popular songs, five (5) from the 1970s and three (3) from the 1980s. These songs were selected using purposive sampling based on three criteria: (i) popularity, meaning songs that achieved widespread recognition through radio airplay, cassette distribution, and live performances from the 1970s to the present; (ii) cultural impact, where songs became closely associated with Kadazandusun community events such as weddings, festivals, and competitions, shaping collective memory and identity; (iii) availability, referring to songs with accessible archival recordings (example Kinabalu Records releases, YouTube uploads) that allow repeated listening and analysis. These songs were not only widely circulated but also became highly popular during social occasions such as weddings and karaoke sessions, reflecting their strong demand within the community.

Data collection in this study is based on creative data, comprising qualitative audio and visual materials (Creswell, 2014). The data sources are as follows: (i) Discography of Sumazau-style songs from the 1970s – 1980s accessed via YouTube; and (ii) Written articles on Sumazau-style songs accessed online through the Google Scholar database. Rahmatulloh & Gunawan (2020) note that Google Scholar is an online platform that enables users to search for various types of academic literature, including papers, theses, books, and peer-reviewed articles from academic publishers,

universities, and other organisations. YouTube, as one of the largest social media platforms, provides a Data API that facilitates data collection for scientific research (Kready *et al.*, 2020). The growing volume of permanent and searchable public social media content has led to increased recommendations for using such platforms in research (Giglietto *et al.*, 2012). The selected Sumazau-style songs were analysed through a process of repeated close listening to identify song form and musical arrangement. This method emphasises detailed observation of structural, melodic, harmonic, and lyrical aspects without involving musical score transcription. The data obtained were then described qualitatively to identify the key characteristics of Kadazandusun Sumazau popular music.

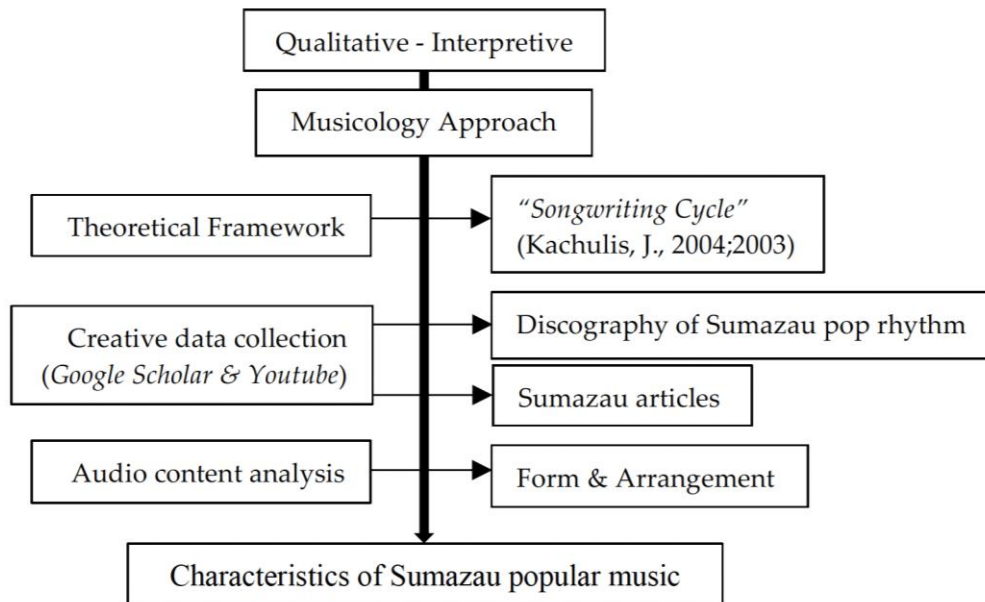


Figure 2. Methodological Framework.

RESULTS

The sample for this study consists of eight iconic Kadazandusun popular songs in the Sumazau rhythm, selected from the 1970s and 1980s. These songs were chosen based on their cultural significance, popularity, and representation of early Sumazau musical identity in the context of popular music. Table 1 presents the list of selected songs, including their titles, performers, and year of release. This purposive sampling provides a focused foundation for analysing the song forms and musical arrangements that contributed to the evolution of Sumazau music during the pre-digital recording era.

The analysis of eight selected Kadazandusun Sumazau-style popular songs from the 1970s to 1980s reveals distinct patterns in song form and musical arrangement. Songs from the 1970s generally employed simpler repetitive forms such as AAA and AAAA, reflecting oral tradition and communal participation (see Table 2). By the 1980s, more complex structures such as AABA and ABABA emerged, influenced by international pop formats and the growth of private recording studios. This evolution demonstrates how Sumazau popular music gradually blended traditional rhythmic foundations with modern compositional techniques. The most dominant song forms identified are AAA and AABA, indicating a strong preference for repetitive structures that are simple yet effective in reinforcing musical identity. These forms were consistent with traditional oral music practices, where repetition aids memorability and communal participation.

Table 1. List of songs selected.

Song Title	Information	
	Singer	Year Released
<i>Odu Aki</i> (Pinolobou, 2012a)	Justin Lusah	1976
<i>Jambatan Tamparuli</i> (Pinolobou, 2012b)	Justin Lusah	1977
<i>Nung Noilaan Ku Da</i> (Juara Modsinding Kopogulu, 2013a)	Francis Landong	1978
<i>Oi Gidi</i> (Otai Channel, 2021)	John Gaisah	1978
<i>Norikot Nodi Bulan Lima</i> (Juara Modsinding Kopogulu, 2014)	John Gaisah	1979
<i>Sinding Do Koirakan</i> (Juara Modsinding Kopogulu, 2016)	Molly Om Donny	1981
<i>Mangaramai Kokotuan</i> (Juara Modsinding Kopogulu, 2020)	Julius Gudok	1982
<i>Lima Ribu</i> (Juara Modsinding Kopogulu, 2013b)	Rider Gutang	1987

Table 2. Analysis of song and arrangement form.

Title	Song Form	Arrangement Form	Remark
<i>Odu Aki</i>	AABCA	Intro – A1 – A2 – B – C – C – Solo – A1 – A2 – B – C – C (fade out)	Complex form, with variations including a bridge (B) and chorus (C)
<i>Jambatan Tamparuli</i>	AAAA	Intro – A1 – A2 – A3 – A4 – Solo – A1 – A2 – A3 – A4 (fade out)	Monotonic, with emphasis on repetition of the main theme
<i>Nung Noilaan Ku Da</i>	AABA	Intro – A1 – A2 – B – A2 – Solo – B – A2 – Outro	Variation with a bridge (B), balanced between repetition and transition
<i>Oi Gidi</i>	AAA	Intro – A1 – A2 – Solo – A2 – A3 – Outro	Simple, concise, dominated by repetition
<i>Norikot Nodi Bulan Lima</i>	ABAB	Intro – A – B – A – B – Solo (fade out)	More structured with A/B contrast, resembling binary form
<i>Sinding Do Koirakan</i>	ABABA	Intro – A – B – A – B – A – B – A – Solo – A – B – A (fade out)	Layered binary combination, with a longer and more varied structure
<i>Mangaramai Kokotuan</i>	AAAA	Intro – A – A – A – Solo – A – A – A – Outro	Minimalist, with full repetition of a single motif
<i>Lima Ribu</i>	AABA	Intro – A – A – B – A – Solo – B – A – Outro	Resembles international pop format (AABA), more refined in terms of structural balance

Songs such as *Oi Gidi* and *Mangaramai Kokotuan* exemplified the minimalist AAA structure, relying heavily on motif repetition with minimal variation. In contrast, *Odu Aki* and *Lima Ribu* demonstrated more complex forms like AABCA and AABA, incorporating bridges and choruses that reflect influences from international pop music formats. This suggests a gradual evolution in compositional style, blending traditional rhythmic foundations with modern structural techniques. Musical arrangements across the sample showed a consistent pattern of introductory sections, instrumental

solos, and fade-out endings, which are characteristic of popular music production during the cassette era. The integration of electric instruments and layered arrangements, as seen in *Sinding Do Koirakan*, highlights a hybridisation of traditional gong rhythms with contemporary band setups. Overall, the findings indicate that while Sumazau popular music retained its rhythmic identity, it also adapted structurally to fit the aesthetics of modern popular music. This hybrid approach played a crucial role in shaping the genre's appeal and cultural relevance during the pre-digital recording era.

DISCUSSION

This preliminary analysis addresses the central research question: how do song form and musical arrangement shape the identity of Kadazandusun Sumazau popular music during the 1970s and 1980s? The findings revealed that in terms of song form, the selected works tended to adopt relatively simple structures, with a dominance of repetitive patterns such as AAA or AAAA. These repetitive forms not only facilitate memorisation and singing but also align with the social function of Sumazau as collective music that accompanies dance. However, some songs exhibit more complex forms such as AABA and ABABA, particularly in the 1980s, indicating a shift towards verse-chorus-bridge structures that resemble global pop styles of the time. This development supports the research question by showing that Sumazau popular song forms evolved from simple traditional patterns to more varied modern structures.

From the perspective of musical arrangement, nearly all songs retain traditional elements through the adaptation of gong and *tinondot* rhythmic patterns in ostinato form. These elements are fused with modern instruments such as electric guitar, keyboard, bass, and drum set, resulting in a syncretic musical style. This fusion preserves the ritualistic spirit of Sumazau. At the same time, it adapts the music into a modern format that suits entertainment and is widely accepted by audiences. The combination of gong and *tinondot* patterns with electric guitar and keyboard affirms that Sumazau popular music is not merely entertainment, but a cultural negotiation between tradition and modernity.

A comparison between the 1970s and 1980s also reveals significant evolution. This transformation was influenced by recording technology, the emergence of local bands, and the development of mass media, which introduced international pop styles to Kadazandusun listeners. Songs from the 1970s tend to use binary or ternary forms with minimal variation, while those from the 1980s began to feature more complex arrangements, including bridges, instrumental solos, and fade-out endings. This progression reflects the changing musical landscape of Sabah, particularly the growth of private recording studios that fostered creative development. Overall, these early findings affirm that song form and musical arrangement are central to the formation of Kadazandusun Sumazau popular music identity. Although rooted in tradition, Sumazau popular music has undergone structural and stylistic transformations to adapt to contemporary tastes. Therefore, this preliminary analysis highlights the importance of form and arrangement as the foundation of musical identity. Further investigation into melody, harmony, and lyrics is necessary to complete a comprehensive understanding of the characteristics of Kadazandusun Sumazau popular music.

The repetitive structure in Sumazau popular music makes it easier for listeners to memorise and recognise its musical identity. Hussin (2023) also emphasise that contemporary Sumazau enriches Sabah's soundscape through the integration of simple yet flexible forms that allow for innovation. The influence of Western musical arrangement marks a shift from ritual function to popular entertainment. Nevertheless, the identity of Sumazau remains intact through its repetitive patterns and the continued use of traditional instruments within its compositions.

CONCLUSION

This study affirms that song form and musical arrangement play a crucial role in shaping the identity of Kadazandusun Sumazau popular music. While rooted in tradition, the genre evolved structurally to adapt to modern tastes. These findings contribute to broader debates on cultural identity and adaptation in Southeast Asian popular music. The use of repetitive structures and simple arrangements not only helps preserve traditional elements within a modern context but also demonstrates how popular music can serve as a medium for cultural continuity. These findings align with recent studies that highlight the relationship between ethnic music, identity, and adaptation to external influences (Jerome *et al.*, 2022).

Specifically, this paper has achieved two main objectives: (i) identifying the characteristics of song form and musical structure in Sumazau-style songs from the 1970s to 1980s; and (ii) examining how musical arrangement contributed to the early identity of Sumazau popular music as a response to the secular cultural shifts within the Kadazandusun community. Although the analysis presented focuses only on song form and arrangement, it opens an important pathway for further research involving melody, harmony, and lyrics.

Future research should examine the development of Sumazau popular music after the 1990s, particularly the influence of digital recording technologies and Artificial Intelligence (AI). Such studies will provide insights into authenticity, adaptation, and identity continuity in the digital era, extending the relevance of this research into contemporary debates on music and technology.

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