

## Demystifying Knowledge on Music Transmission, Creation, and Succession Among the Indigenous Semai of Malaysia

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**Published online:** 5 November 2023

**Cite this article (APA):** Chan, C. S. C. (2023). Demystifying knowledge on music transmission, creation, and succession among the indigenous Semai of Malaysia. *Malaysian Journal of Music*, 12 (1), 80–98.  
<https://doi.org/10.37134/mjm.vol12.1.6.2023>

### Abstract

The Semai are a group of indigenous minorities, collectively known as the Orang Asli of Peninsular Malaysia. They are well-known for their dream songs or *jenulak* that is taught by the *gunik* (spirit guide) to *halak* (shaman). The knowledge of how *jenulak* is transmitted, created, and succeeded becomes important today when researchers collaborate with culture bearers to sustain their musical heritage. This knowledge is integral to the sustainability of Semai musical heritage, indigenous concepts, and values. This article examines (1) how *jenulak* is transmitted from one generation to the next generation; (2) how Semai musicians create music; and (3) who can succeed as the next generation of Semai musicians. It utilises the revisiting ethnography methodology in which the researcher re-examines case studies through data from past transcribed fieldnotes and interviews with Semai musicians over a span of 10 years. In this article, I argue that the learning of *jenulak* is not limited to the transmission from *gunik* to *halak*—it can be learned by anyone who has strong interest in the music. Second, Semai musicians do create new *jenulak* devoid of supernatural transmission after learning to sing those with spiritual origins. Third, the potential for being a Semai musician, creator, and successor is “achieved” rather than “ascribed”.

*Keywords:* indigenous music, musical creation, musical succession, musical transmission, Orang Asli, Semai.

### Introduction

The Semai are one among 18 groups of Orang Asli (*orang*: people, *asli*, original), the indigenous minorities of Peninsular Malaysia. They number 60,438 (29 percent) of a population of 206,777 Orang Asli in Malaysia (Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli, 2020). Each Orang Asli group has their own musical heritage that comprise songs for healing ceremonies, rites of passages and recreation (Chan, 2012a, 2012b, Mohd. Jalaluddin, 2003; Roseman, 1991). Their mysterious healing songs taught by a *gunik* (spirit guide) to *halak* (shamans) through a reciprocal teaching and learning process during dreams has intrigued researchers for many years. These songs are sung to summon the *gunik* to aid in diagnosing illness during healing ceremonies. The *halak* was a powerful person who had the ability to heal, enchant

and incur sickness among the people through their connection with the spiritual world (Lim, 2016, p. 5). Some examples of healing ceremonies are the *pinloin* among the Jahai (Schebesta, 1973); *belian*, Mah Meri (Karim, 1981); and *kebut*, Semai (Mohd. Jalaluddin, 2003). Among the Semai, dream songs are known as *jenulak* and are sung during sacred *kebut* (healing) ceremony. *Jenulak* can also be sung for secular festivals such as *dian* (durian) and paddy harvest festival, annual ancestral day celebrations and other recreational events. It may also be performed as entertainment for local and international visitors for tourism events.

### Statement of Problem

In traditional societies, music is transmitted through an enculturation process that occurs over a length of time. During the learning processes, young musicians are also ingrained in the concepts and values of the society. For the past two decades, I have conducted research on the music of several Orang Asli groups, namely the Semelai, Jahai, Semai, Mah Meri, and Jakun, in their cultural context. In a recent Semai music advocacy project, I have collaborated with the culture bearers to advocate for the sustainability of the Semai musical heritage. It was incumbent on me to understand how indigenous music was encultured to sustain the indigenous values inherent in the community. I encountered several issues and challenges involving the transmission, creation, and succession of the traditional music. Firstly, traditional music is transmitted through the oral tradition which includes a dynamic process of learning through observing, imitating, remembering, and recreating. Till date, there is scarce documentation on how Semai oral traditions are transmitted from one generation to another. I have only conducted one research to examine the music pedagogy of a Semai musician through a non-interventive research approach. I discovered that the Semai musician practiced teacher-student mobility, freedom of choice, intuitive responses, integration of cultural concepts, flexibility, and adaptability in response to the children's character (Chan, 2015).

The learning processes in traditional societies are usually summarised as “rote learning”—listening, observing, and imitating. Current literature on rote learning relegates it to imitative learning through repetition and memorisation without creative thinking processes: regurgitation, cramming, mugging, and parroting of knowledge. These definitions are rather decondensing and does not consider the entire enculturation process of learning, creating, and succeeding as a musician. During my music advocacy workshops with the Semai, I had many questions that required deeper understanding of Semai transmission processes such as “How did the elder musicians correct the young musicians when they did not achieve the musical aesthetics or desired sound? Do the elder musicians teach by demonstrating the music phrase by phrase or as a whole piece?”

Secondly, I encountered issues in identifying the creator of the music which I had recorded. Since I intended to publish some of my Semai music recordings online, the “composer” and “lyricist” categories provided by the intellectual property organisations for royalties did not fit into how traditional music is organised. The “creator” of oral traditions differs from the “composer” as known in western classical and popular music. In western classical music, the creator of the music is an individual composer whose work is premiered and presented as a final product. Among the Orang Asli, the Jahai and Mah Meri recreate traditional secular songs through spontaneous improvisations of song text, melody, and rhythm. As each individual musicians repeatedly embellish secular songs in various ways, the song will eventually sound like a new song with tinges of the original tunes (Chan, 2016; Chan, 2023). This process of creation is noted by Nettl (1954) who emphasises on the importance of “communal recreation” in improvisation, which involves “improvising over a previously existent melody, or changing and varying it (p. 82). This phenomenon supports Rice’s (2017) statement who asserts that even though songs and music may be created based on group interaction in communities, “individual agency” in the creation of music is also an aspect to be considered. He emphasises on “formative processes where people historically construct, socially maintain and individually create and experience music” (Rice, 2017). However, acknowledging a “creator” is not of paramount importance in

Orang Asli society.

In the case of the Semai, *jenulak* is derived from supernatural origins. As such, the answers to creation and ownership becomes complicated. If the *gunik* is the teacher of the *jenulak*, how do we credit a spirit guide? In addition, did the *halak* change any of the music and song texts he acquired from his predecessor who acquired them from the *gunik*? Would these modifications credit him as a “creator”? The identification of ownership, copyrights and intellectual property becomes important today when publishing music online makes it susceptible to public sampling, modification, and commercialisation without proper attributions.

The third issue in my music advocacy projects was the aura of mysticism that surrounded the origins of *jenulak*, which is believed to be taught by a *gunik* to a *halak* (shaman). According to (Domhoff, 1985), “The song becomes the property of the dreamer, who may use it to summon the *gunik*. The *gunik* may then be called upon to assist the singer and his kinsmen and co-villagers in a variety of ways, but especially in curing illnesses and warding off other kinds of attacks...” (p. 27). In my musical advocacy project, I encountered issues with the grandchildren of the shaman who did not want to replace their grandfather as the “lead” singer. They believed that *jenulak* can only be sung by the *halak* (shaman) and rearrangement of the original text is forbidden. There is also fear that when a particular *jenulak* is performed, its owner, the *gunik* will be summoned. Their grandfather, the shaman, informed me that only a *halak* with proper qualification can summon a *gunik*, therefore he gave me consent to teach his *jenulak* to the public (Bah Kang Bah Mat, personal communication, May 6, 2017). However, one of his grandchildren insisted that singing the *jenulak* without their grandfather would invoke involuntary responses from the *gunik*. The contradiction between Bah Kang’s approval for me to transmit his *jenulak* and his grandchild’s differing opinion led me into a confusion and hindered the progress of my project.

Hence, this article attempts to clarify some taboos associated with *jenulak*. A deeper analysis of these varied perceptions may lead to a better understanding of how *jenulak* can or cannot be transmitted to the public.

### Objectives

The aim of this research is to examine (1) how Semai songs and music are transmitted from one generation to the next generation; (2) how Semai musicians create songs and music; and (3) who can succeed as the next generation of Semai musicians and composers?

### Semai Concepts and Indigenous Values in Music

In traditional societies, the concepts and values of a society are integrated into the enculturation of music processes (Merriam, 1964). The term “enculturation” is defined as the aspects of the learning experience ... by means of which, initially, and in later life, [man] achieves competence in his culture (Herskovits, 1948, p. 39). Enculturation refers to the process in which the “individual learns his culture, and it must be emphasised that this is a never-ending process continuing throughout the life span of the individual” (Merriam 1964, p. 146). In learning music, one is encultured in the concepts of the culture.

The Semai are an egalitarian society that practices the concept of sharing and working together (Baer, 2006). The egalitarian concept is embodied in their singing structure. For example, the *halak* is never highlighted as a soloist with exceptional talent—the end of the *halak*’s solo phrases is overlapped by the heterophonic singing of the *centong* chorus (bamboo stamping tubes) (Chan, 2012; Mohd Jalaluddin, 2003). Another Semai concept of paramount importance is *tulah* that renders everyone responsible for all humanity. There should be no hurt, harm or deprivation inflicted on another individual (Nicholas, 2010, p. 81). Therefore, no Semai children are forced to learn any musical instruments if they were not interested in it. Semai concepts of egalitarianism and *tulah* are encultured into the Semai through

the process of learning music.

### Literature Review

In this section, I discuss some of the literature about transmission, creation, and succession in traditional music of various societies. Much of the literature are from older sources as there has not been many scholars that have examined these three processes in recent years.

#### Transmission

The section provides some examples of the transmission process in the diverse cultures of the world. Merriam (1964) and Nettl (2005) are among the earliest ethnomusicologists that have addressed issues of transmission and creation in the late 20th century. Merriam states that formal training is given to youngsters who demonstrate potentials to become “real” musicians in the society. Musicianship is a special skill that requires directed learning. Future specialists are identified and undergo special instructions and training in the musical skills (Merriam 1964, p. 150). Densmore (1930) describes the learning of music among American Indians in general as:

... the young men “sit with the singers at the drum and learn the songs in that way.” They are allowed to pound on the drum with the others, and they sing softly until they learn the melodies (p. 654).

On the Nupe of Nigeria,

... you may see small boys practicing drumming on little toy-like instruments under the eye of the father. They will go with him wherever he is called to perform, watching him, and when they are sufficiently advanced, accompanying him on their own drums” (Nadel, 1942, p. 301).

According to Lord (1960), Yugoslavian male youth learn oral epics by “listening closely to an elder, imitating his singing and finally, having acquired the necessary expertise, starting to perform at informal gatherings (pp. 22-24). Densmore (1930), Nadel (1942) and Lord (1960) reveals a close relationship between the teacher and the student in the learning process. In a more recent literature on Balinese music, Kitley (1995) discusses the complex teacher-student relationship in which the teacher and pupil have an idealised relationship whereby dedication, love, and loyalty mean more than money” (p. 49).

In some cultures, punishment is also a method used in training musicians. Nketia observed that Akan musicians of Africa “were not always patient with their pupils. Master drummers have memories of the smacks received when they faltered and of other hardships” (Nketia, 1954, p. 40). The cult drummers of Brazil in South America are “put to public tests before the gods themselves, but any deviation from the strict rhythm will be punished by a sharp rap over the knuckles, administered by the player of the larger drum, who uses his drumstick for the purpose” (Herskovits, 1944, p. 489)

Blacking’s (1957) observation of children’s singing games demonstrates their ability to learn tonal systems and rhythms beyond those introduced in Western Music Education. Venda children could:

acclimatise to singing the heptatonic melodies and more complex rhythms which are so common in Venda music... it would be wrong to say that Venda children learn tetratonic songs before embarking upon pentatonic and hexatonic song... There is a factor of taste, which is always hard to explain: the hexatonic “*Ndo bva ba tshidongo*” is everywhere very popular, so that in spite of certain musical and linguistic complexities, it appears to be one of the first songs that children learn, simply because they hear it more often.

Irawati (2019) states that the transmission of *kêlèntangan*, music performed by the Dayak Bênuaq of Indonesia requires different mechanisms (Irawati, 2019). These mechanisms include *bêkajiq* (listening), *kintau* (imitating), and *tameh* (improvisation) (p.108). Hand (2017) discusses the term

*kupingan* or “ear”, as an approach to learning that derives from the learner’s keen interest in learning through listening. In *kupingan*, the student’s takes the lead in learning even without any specific teacher who provides personal attention (p. 32). Harisna (2010) emphasises that “learning by ear” can only be successful if it is “supported by perseverance and the willingness of individuals to repeat the results of their observations” (p. 42). Harisna (2010) and Waridi (1997) examined how Indonesian gamelan musicians learn by ear, self-discipline, and ascetic activities. Blacking (1957), Irawati (2019), Hand (2017) and Harisna (2010) reveals a student driven self-directed approach to learning music.

In a recent literature, Treloyn (2022) argues for the importance of intergenerational knowledge in music transmission and ethnomusicological praxis. She states the process in music transmission is complex and changing—and is not necessarily passed along in a vertical manner among the indigenous Aborigines Australia (Treloyn, 2022). This revelation is quite interesting as the younger generation who have mastered a traditional musical skill may impart it to an older generation.

The literature on transmission provides some basic understanding to how music was transmitted from the elders to the young. However, the transmission of song from the spirit guide of the supernatural to human world continues to be shrouded in mystery.

## Creation

In traditional societies, creation is shaped by public acceptance and rejection. Nettl (1954) argues that creation among nonliterate people is the product of the mind of an individual and a group of individuals (Nettl, 1954, p. 81). However, the Grimm brothers argues that “folklore (including music) is the expression of an entire people that the group of reference as an entity is the creator of each folklore item”. Grimms states that there is no individual creation and that any item of folklore is created from bits and patches contributed by the people and put together into a cohesive entity at the time of creation (Merriam, 1964, p. 165). However, Merriam (1964) argues that there are:

... processes of compositions which groups of individual's works together, but in all cases, there are individuals working creatively. Items of culture do not simply appear out of nowhere, there must be contributions from specific individuals, whether these contributions can or cannot be pinpointed after the fact of composition” (Merriam, 1964, p. 166).

While creations of non-literature societies have not been studied and written about in as detail as the music of “high” cultures, Merriam contends that there is much evidence to support that nonliterate people know creation, recognised it as a distinct process and some are able to discuss it. The Ibo musicians “must learn all tunes by ear, or compose his own, which he frequently does” (Basden, 1921, p. 190). Each adult male relatives among Mangaia in Polynesia must recite a song, if they cannot compose a song, they will have to pay someone to provide him with a suitable song (Andersen, 1933, p. 155).

Roseman (1991) states that the Temiar, a group of Orang Asli, had come to engage with the spirits of modernity—the airplane spirit and canned sardine spirit during the Japanese occupation of Malaya through song. She deconstructs the notion of an “authentic” Orang Asli that does not change over time. The Temiars channelled their disadvantaged status into creative song creations—“they may be forced to eat canned sardines instead of freshwater fish, but they can dream and sing the power of its spirit” (Roseman, 2006, p. 201). Whether or not they are submitting to their disenfranchisement through an illusory inversion of disempowerment, Temiar shamans communicate with the spirits of modernity in seeking remedies for illnesses (Roseman, 2006). This is one of the earliest types of evidence on the global mobility and fluidity of song text creation.

In a most recent literature, Cannon (2022) states that creativity in performing *nhac tai tu* in

Vietnam is an ongoing process. Musicians in these ensembles integrate new elements of music inspired by the momentous sounds. For example, inspired by the construction sounds in the building next to the performance venue, Vietnamese musicians match the pitch of the nails hammered into the wall with the pitches on musical instruments (Cannon, 2022).

These literatures review that creation occurs in traditional societies in gradual, subtle ways. Therefore, attributing a single “composer” to a traditional piece does not fit into the way traditional music changes over time.

### Succession

Among the Semai community, *jenulak* is believed to be taught by a *gunik* to the *halak* through dreams. The ability to be a *halak* that receives *jenulak* from a *gunik* is an interesting component discussed in this article. In traditional societies, the identification of a potential musician through the inheritance of “talent” or development of musical abilities impinges upon the concept of “ascribed” and “achieved”. Linton defines these two terms as follows:

“Ascribed” status is those which are assigned to individuals without reference to their innate differences and abilities. They can be predicted and trained from the moment of birth. The “achieved” status is, as a minimum, those requiring special qualities, although they are not necessarily limited to these. They are not assigned to individuals from birth but are left open to be filled through competition and individual effort. (Linton, 1936, p. 115).

There are many literatures that talk about how songs are received from a divine power. On the Pawnee, an American Indian group, Densmore (1929) states:

A young man received this song in a dream, while mourning for his parent who had died. He saw a woman coming toward him and said, “Mother is coming.” The woman said, you have seen me, now you must learn this song.” The young man learned the song, lived a long time afterward, and took part in the Bear Dance (Densmore, 1929, p. 37).

However, there is also evidence that suggests that there is a process of conscious creation even when there are claims of visitations from supernatural forces. For example, Crashing Thunder, a Winnebago Indian says that he falsely claimed a visitation from the supernatural. Therefore, his “new” song that went with the visitation may have been pre-composed, or perhaps as an aftermath of an unsuccessful petition (Radin, 1926, p. 26).

On a recent interview with a Semai musician, Gladis (personal communication, August 10, 2022) stated that the sacred *jenulak* is also sung by his village folks during secular events. He informed me that the Semai in his village (north Perak) often improvise new song text based on the *jenulak* tunes related to sacred rituals to sing during different rituals. Some *jenulak* may have origins from a *gunik* but over time, these *jenulak* evolve from sacred to secular contexts. He said this may not be allowed in Kampar, Central Perak, but it is common in his hometown, Pos Kemar, Gerik, northeast of Perak. There are occasions where Semai musicians who are not *halak* improvise new tunes over current *jenulak* tunes. Gladis’ testimony shows that *jenulak* can also be rearranged by any Semai in the community.

### Methodology

The article utilises revisiting ethnography as a methodology to examining current issues in my work on applied ethnomusicology. It is a re-examination of my past fieldnotes, interviews, and experiences acquired during my research on the Semai group from Perak. I divide my findings into four cases studies from different Semai villages in Central Perak including Kampung Ulu Geroh, Gopeng (2011), Kampung Bukit Terang, Kampar (2018), Kampung Batu 15, Tapah (2012) and Kampung Sungai Tisong, Sungkai (2022).

## Discussion

### Case 1: Saripah binti Ngah of Kampung Ulu Geroh, Gopeng

From 2011-2012, I conducted research on the traditional music of the Semai of Kampung Ulu Geroh in Gopeng, Perak.<sup>1</sup> The villagers introduced me to Saripah binti Ngah, an elderly lady, who led the *sewang* dance group (Chan, 2011, p. 36). I thought Saripah was a female *halak* but she informed me that she was an Anglican Christian and had no connections with the supernatural world. Since her husband did not want to learn *jenulak*, Saripah decided to learn the *jenulak* titled “*Wak Dayang*” from her late mother-in-law, Wah Weng. Wah Weng had learned it from her late husband, Bah Tum. Bah Tum was well known as the village *halak*. Saripah said she could only understand a few words from the “*Wak Dayang*” *jenulak* such as *tempat dayang* (the lady-in-waiting’s abode), *guru* (teacher), *ineng di tah* (look above), *ineng kuil* (look to the right and left) (Figure 1) (Chan, 2012). Unlike Bah Tum, who learned *jenulak* from visitations by specific *gunik*, Saripah learned *jenulak* due to her own interest. This case demystifies the perception that healing songs are directly transmitted from the *gunik* to the *halak* and can only be sung by them. It shows that *jenulak* with origins from a sacred context has evolved into a secular context.

Besides “*Wak Dayang*”, Saripah created her own *jenulak* known as “*Dendang Dendang*”. Some of the song texts include “*Dendang Dendang* (to sing)” and “*guru*” (teacher) (Figure 2). Saripah said she used a more *rancak* (energetic) and livelier “samba” rhythm pattern to perform this *jenulak*. “Samba” is a rhythmic pattern derived from Brazil. I believe Saripah used the term “samba” to relate to a more lively energetic rhythm in her new song. There are some similar musical elements between “*Dendang Dendang*” and “*Wak Dayang*” such as (1) the rhythmic pattern of combined quavers and semiquavers conjunct melodies (a) and (2) a perfect 4<sup>th</sup> interval rise or drop (b) before long phrases of conjunct melody (c) (Figure 2 and 3). Saripah’s testimony demystifies the perception that *jenulak* is solely transmitted from divine inspiration to a shaman. It shows that *jenulak* can be transmitted to anyone interested. It can also be sung in a secular context by a common person without summoning the *gunik*. This testimony also shows that Semai musicians create new *jenulak* which is inspired by the individual’s local and globally mediated experience through mass media.



Figure 1. Ulu Geroh, Gopeng, Perak *sewang* dancers. From left: Saripah binti Ngah, Long Pinpin d/o Bah Can, Long Baru d/o Bah Gubing, Wak Te Oi, Linda, Waran and Kerelim (Chan, 2011, p. 36).

# Wak Dayang

Moderato (♩ = c. 108)

As performed by: Saripah Ngah

The musical score is presented in four systems, each with a vocal line and a centong/cente line. The key signature is one flat (B-flat) and the time signature is 2/4. The tempo is marked 'Moderato' with a quarter note equal to approximately 108 beats per minute.

**System 1:** The vocal line begins with a rest, followed by the lyrics 'Tem - pat da'. The centong line provides a rhythmic accompaniment with eighth and sixteenth notes.

**System 2:** The vocal line starts at measure 7 with the lyrics 'yang gu ru de je lei wang en ai de je'. It includes a triplet of eighth notes and two eighth-note beams labeled 'b'. The cente line continues the accompaniment.

**System 3:** The vocal line starts at measure 13 with the lyrics 'Ar ai da ye wei e na lei eng'. It features a quarter-note beam labeled 'b', a half-note beam labeled 'c', and another quarter-note beam labeled 'b'. The cente line continues the accompaniment.

**System 4:** The vocal line starts at measure 19 with the lyrics 'lei a da yang o Gu ru de je na'. It includes a half-note beam labeled 'c'. The cente line continues the accompaniment.

© Semai of Ulu Geroh, Gopeng, Perak

Figure 2. Excerpt from *Wak Dayang* (Chan, 2012a, p. 64).



## Dendang Dendang

Composed by:  
 Saripah Ngah

**Allegro** (M.M. ♩ = c. 120)

Vocal

Centong

Voc.

Cente

Voc.

Cente

Voc.

Cente

Voc.

Cente

Lyrics: a Den dang de je na ma mo de lei

Lyrics: eng le o A bong de

Lyrics: je ha da ye eng lei o Gu

Lyrics: ru de je na ma mo de lei wei eng

© Semai of Ulu Geroh, Gopeng, Perak

Figure 3. Excerpt from “Dendang Dendang” (Chan, 2012a, p. 65).

## Case 2: Bah Kang Bah Mat of Kampung Bukit Terang, Kampar, Perak

From 2011-2012, I conducted research on advocating the music of Bah Kang a/l (son of) Bah Mat (Figure 4) of Kampung Orang Asli Bukit Terang, Kampar, Perak. Bah Kang (Figure 4 and 5) is a *pawang*, the most powerfully ranked shaman in his village.<sup>2</sup> He was born in Kampung Orang Asli Batu 16, Jalan Tapah during the beginning of World War II (1939-1945). His grandmother, the late Enjau, was a well-known *pawang*, who was able to summon specific *gunik* to aid in childbirth and the curing of illnesses. Bah Kang inherited the art of shamanism through genuine interest and immersion into the role. Before he was approached by any *gunik*, he had learned some *jenulak* mainly from his sister-in-law, who had learned it from Enjau, who was already quite elderly then. Bah Kang says that not everyone can inherit the art of showmanship. It is a role that required strength of heart and mind, sincerity, and integrity (Bah Kang a/l Bah Mat, personal communication, 6 May 2017).



Figure 4. From left: Bah Muda, author, Bah Kang. (photo by Clare Chan, May 9, 2004)



Figure 5. Bah Kang. (photo by Clare Chan, July 1, 2017)

During this research period, Bah Kang allowed me to record and learn to sing four of his *jenulak*. The four *jenulak* are “*Sangkut Dipulai yang Debor*”, “*Wak Genamun*”, “*Wak Jenudi*” and “*Tok Barat*” (Chan, 2019). On a discussion of the *jenulak* “*Wak Genamun*”<sup>3</sup>, Bah Kang said he learned this *jenulak* from his sister-in-law, who learned it from his grandmother, Enjau. Enjau received the song from the *gunik* known as Wak Genamun. After he began to learn the *jenulak* seriously, Bah Kang said that Wak Genamun began to appear in his dreams and friendship is developed.

On the question of how Bah Kang acquired the songs, he replied:

*Wak Genamun... nenek saya dulu, dia dapat saya belajar. Wak Jenudi ... arwah kakak ipar saya, tapi saya belajar dia punya sewang tu, baru dia masuk. Kalau tak belajar tak dapat pun, mmm teruk, teruk sewang ni.*

Wak Genamun... from my grandmother, she got it and I learned it from her. Wak Jenudi ... my late sister-in-law, I first learned her *sewang* before 'it' (the *gunik*) came to me. If I didn't learn, I wouldn't be able to get it ... hmmm difficult ... (Bah Kang Bah Mat, personal communication, May 6, 2017).

Bah Kang was attracted to learning *jenulak* from an early age. He stated that a *gunik* will only choose to approach those who demonstrate genuine interest and diligence in learning *jenulak* and sustaining a relationship with it. Bah Kang explains how he acquired the *jenulak*:

*Bukan saya dapat sendiri, saya belajar dulu baru dia letak dia punya ... apa tu ... dekat saya, macam ni, dia punya bunga*

I did not obtain this myself, I learned it first, then only did the *gunik* place the ... *what do you call that ... in me... like this...* her flowers (referring to ornamented melodies) (Bah Kang, personal communication, February 3, 2018).

*Malam-malam belajar, baru dia letak dia punya benda itu hari-hari, setiap malam, bukan kira bulan, tahun-tahun. Darah kami panas, benda dia sejuk, benda dari gunung,* (Bah Kang Bah Mat, personal communication, 1 February 2017).

I learned the song for many nights, and then only did it place the song in me every day every night, sometimes over a few months, even years. Our blood is warm, the spirit guide is cool, it comes from the mountains. (Bah Kang Bah Mat, personal communication, February 2, 2017).

Initially, Bah Kang had learned “*Wak Genamun*” by imitating his late sister-in-law. With continued interest and hard work at learning “*Wak Genamun*”, he stated that the female *gunik*, Wak Genamun, had begun to approach him in his dream and lay down more verses ... not in one dream, but in a succession of dreams. Bah Kang acquired his status as a musician partially through the “achieved” and “ascribed” status. He mainly acquired his musical skills by learning through listening and observing. Bah Kang says he did not alter any of the lyrics and music he learnt from the *gunik*. Therefore, I acknowledged Bah Kang in my music transcriptions of his *jenulak* using the term “as performed by” (Chan, 2019). The musical characteristics of “*Wak Genamun*” are a repeated rhythmic pattern consisting of dotted crochets and quavers played by the *centong* (bamboo stamping tubes)(a), a typical perfect 4<sup>th</sup> pitch rise or drop (b) before a long conjunct melody (c) (Figure 6).

Bah Kang allowed me to document, record and teach his *jenulak* to the public because I had come to learn from him to gain a deeper understanding of his *jenulak* and sought his permission to disseminate his *jenulak* to the public. He informed me that he had inform his *gunik* on this matter.

### WAK GENAMUN

As performed by:  
Bah Kang Bah Mat

$\text{♩} = 75$

The musical score is written in 2/4 time with a tempo of 75 beats per minute. It consists of two main parts: Vocal and Centong. The Centong part is a continuous rhythmic accompaniment. The Vocal part includes lyrics in Chinese characters and Pinyin. The score is divided into systems, with measures 8, 16, 25, 33, 42, 51, and 59 marked at the beginning of each system. There are various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings (a, b, c) throughout the piece.

Vocal: Ah ——— nak lek tu-wut tu - wit eh

Centong: (continues throughout)

Voc. 8: Nah lek ——— nong a - mei lei nong Ai ——— ei - ii ke-tu - wut tu-wit

Voc. 16: Ku pa-dek le-ng- rik de har nu ru am-bei ——— Ah - ——— nak lek tu-wut tu - wit Ku pa-

Voc. 25: dek le-ng-rik ru nu am-bei de har ——— Ju - laq teng-gel teng - gel la-luk ——— Nah lek —

Voc. 33: ——— nong a - mei lei long ——— Nah lek ——— me-nong nok mei de har nu ru am-bei

Voc. 42: Ah ——— nak lek tu-wut tu - wit Ku pa-dek le-ng-rik nu ru am-bei de har —

Voc. 51: ——— Ju - laq teng-gel teng - gel la-luk ——— Nah lek ——— nong a - mei lei nong ———

Voc. 59: ——— Ai.. ——— e - ii ——— ke-tu-wut tu - wit Ku pa - dek le-ng-rik Ah ———

Figure 6. Excerpt from “Wak Genamun” (Chan, 2019, p. 21).

### Case 3: Alang Bah Kang from Kampung Orang Asli Batu 15, Tapah, Perak

Alang a/l (son of) Bah Kang (Figure 7 & 8) is the third son of Bah Kang Bah Mat. He lives in Kampung Batu 15, Tapah. Alang is prolific at playing *pensol* (nose flute). He learned to play *pensol* from a relative when he was already an adult. Alang is a self-taught musician who learned to sing *jenulak* from his father. Alang has no connection with his father's *gunik*. He is an example of a musician who learned music based on his own interest and initiative. In 2013, he created a *jenulak* titled, “*Semain*” (Chan, 2019, pp. 35–36). He said it was a song of “prayer” for peace and happiness. He offers this *jenulak* to whom he calls, the ‘Most Powerful/ Omnipotent’ for blessings of goodwill and protection from catastrophe and sickness (Alang Bah Kang, personal communication, March 5, 2017). Alang acquired his musical and creation skills through listening and observing. Therefore, Alang’s status as a musician is “achieved” and not “ascribed.”

The musical characteristics of “*Semain*” has some similarities with “*Wak Genamun*” such as the repeated dotted crochet rhythmic pattern (a) played by the *centong* and a typical perfect 4<sup>th</sup> (b) pitch rise or drop sung by the singer. “*Wak Genamun*” combines conjunct melodies (c) with more “tuneful” melody (d) (Figure 9).



Figure 7. Alang Bah Kang (left) on the *rebana*. (photo by Clare Chan, May 9, 2004)



Figure 8. Alang Bah Kang. (photo by Clare Chan, July 1, 2017)

**SEMAIN** Composed by: Alang Bah Kang

♩ = 75

Verse 1

Voice b

Ngbeta - bik ngbesa - dup Ngber - cip, ce - na - goh - nu

Centong

(Pattern continues throughout)

7 b

Voi. jun Ke-long ha - laq de les Pra - cex a - p - ra - ciew Lei nu ta - par teg jun Se -

14 b c c

Voi. manj le - ngap - le - ngop de ku jik Ge - nap be - nu - ak Ge - nap len - grik - jun

21 c d

Voi. Og a - bor de ku jik - bei - Bu - men loh de jun Jun ja - gak ta - pak la -

Verse 2

27 v

Voi. man Ge - nap be - nu - ak Aa - ii Kra - leg kra - log Sera - yeg - se - ra -

36

Voi. yog a - je - nu - laq I - mai min - du be - lem - pog Rela - wek re - la - poi se - lak ka -

43 3

Voi. wil Ku lod en - toi Per - man - ser - ngik Ke - long ha - laq Cer - ngai ha - rok ra -

49 c

Voi. nyot Ku a - rik bi dui a - noh be - i Se - manj ga - pit Se - manj se - mar jun

Figure 9. Excerpt from “*Semain*” (Chan, 2019, p. 35).

#### Case 4: Bah Ajis Bah Labu from Kampung Sungai Tisong, Sungkai, Perak

In 2022, my research team and I recorded five *jenulak* from the Semai of Sungai Tisong, Sungkai, Perak (Chan, 2022).<sup>4</sup> The lead singer was Bah Ajis bin Bah Labu, an elderly Semai who often sung for visitors at tourism events (personal communication, August 23, 2022). Bah Ajis clearly informed us that he is not a shaman and has no knowledge of healing. I recorded two *jenulak* created by Bah Ajis titled “*Daun Nipah Mahu Jari Nipan*” and “*Berjalan di Ulu Liang*”. In addition, I recorded two *jenulak* which Bah Ajis had learned from a deceased elder, Bah Pagar son of Bah Abus —“*Dik Dik Berbuah*” and “*Selamat Guru Lalu*”. On a discussion of the fifth *jenulak* “*E Manik Ju Koyan*” *jenulak*, Bah Ajis said:

*... saya punya pakcik, yang Manik Koyan tu ... hujan daripada Koyan tu ... pakcik saya la ... dulu saya ikut suara dia la ... saya belajar, saya ingat, adat budaya kita Orang Assli, kalau saya tak belajar saya punya pakcik, nanti kita pupus, kita lupa, kita takdak tahu apa-apa.*

... it belongs to my uncle, the *Manik Koyan*, the rain from Koyan ... it is from my uncle ... last time, I imitated his voice... I learned, I remember, the customary traditions of our people, if I don't learn from my uncle, then it will disappear, we forget, we don't know anything then (personal communication, August 23, 2022).

Bah Ajis had learned “*E Manik Ju Koyan*” from a now deceased uncle, Yok Chep. Yok Chep was a well-known *halak* in their village. Bah Ajis said he memorised the song texts and did not change them. When asked whether Yok Chep acquired it from a *gunik*, Bah Ajis said:

*... Itu Yok Chep, itu dia, dia dapat, terpulang sama dia, dari mana dia dapat, saya boleh tak tahula ... sebab orang dulu, kita tak dapat sampai, macam mana dia punya nasib ... tapi untuk saya, saya ikut juga ... tok halak, memang tok halak. Tapi sampai saya takdak tok halak la. Minat, saya minat lagu ...*

That's Yok Chep, that's him, he got it, it's up to him, where he got it, I don't know... because they are people from the past, we cannot reach them, their luck in life... but for me, I just follow... he was a shaman, really a shaman... but when it got to me, I am not a shaman... I am just interested in the song (Bah Ajis, personal communication, August 23, 2022)

Bah Ajis is unsure of the origins of the *jenulak* he had learned from the people who had already passed on. He said he just imitated the *jenulak* from Yok Chep because he was interested in it. Bah Ajis' interest in learning *jenulak* is also driven by a love and nostalgia for his people. He states that even though Yok Chep has passed away, he misses his voice, the people of the past, the voices of his ancestors.

*Dah meninggal, tak dak... saya ikut dia punya suara, saya rindu, sebab saya orang dulu, kita, walaupun tidak pakai baju... tapi saya ingat suara kita orang asal juga.*

He has passed away, does not exist anymore... I just imitate his voice, I miss it, because our people, we, even if we do not wear clothes... but I remember the voices of our ancestors too.

Bah Ajis informed us that he had created two of the *jenulak* that we recorded—“*Daun Nipah Jari Lipan*” and “*Berjalan Ulu Liang*”. He said:

*... saya sendiri bikin, suka hati mau bikin nyanyi la .... belajar sendiri, saya suka cipta lagu, saya takdak ada guna, saya cakap terus terang, bukan berhalak, saya tiada.*

(Bah Ajis, personal communication, August 23, 2022).

... I created them myself; I enjoy creating the music to sing ... I learned by myself, I like to create new songs, I tell you honestly, I don't have any shamanistic ability, I am not a healer, I am not (Bah Ajis, personal communication, August 23, 2022).

*Itu saya lagu sendiri, itu mula pertama, lepas tu saya, dua ... daun nipah itu lagu saya sendiri. Bukan sama siapa, saya dapat, saya cipta la...* (Bah Ajis, personal communication, 23 August 2022)

It is my own song, my first song, then second ... *daun nipah* is my own song. It is not from anyone, I made it, I created it la ... (Bah Ajis, personal communication, August 23, 2022).



Figure 10. Bah Ajis a/l Bah Labu. (photo by Clare Chan, June 2, 2022)

When I asked Bah Ajis about the meaning of the two *jenulak* he created, he could give me lengthy descriptions about them. When asked about the meaning of three *jenulak* he learned from Yok Chep and Bah Pagar a/l (son of) Bah Bei, Bah Ajis says he does not know what the elders wanted to deliver in the *jenulak*. Bah Aji insists again that he did not change any text from the *jenulak* he learned from Bah Pagar. On the *jenulak* “*Dik Dik Berbuai*”, Bah Ajis said:



... berbuai saya pun tak tahu ... saya ikut juga... serupa biasa juga... saya dengar itu macam, serupa saya nyanyi itu macam juga... serupa penyanyi kalau P. Ramlee... itu macam, orang baru, macam juga ikut ... Kita orang asli juga mana kita punya pakcik nyanyi itu macam, tak boleh, tak mau berubah.

... about “berbuai”, I also don’t know... I just follow... just like normal... I heard it like that, so I sing it like that too... like the singer P. Ramlee... everyone also just follows... We are Orang Asli also, our elders sing like that... cannot change, I don't want to change it too (Bah Ajis, personal communication, August 23, 2022)

Bah Ajis’ testimony that he is not a shaman and has no healing powers show that *jenulak* can be learned by anyone interested in singing them. Therefore, learning music is “achieved” and not “ascribed”. Bah Ajis’ insistence that he did not change any of the song text tells us that *jenulak* that is learned from their predecessors are like lyrics of popular songs that we memorise today. On his own creations, Bah Ajis feels that he has the freedom to alter and change the text of the song.

### Conclusion

This article demystifies the perception created by the Semai and previous academic literature that the transmission of *jenulak* is limited to spiritual encounters. It also deconstructs the notion that only people with “spiritual” status can learn to sing *jenulak*. Therefore, the ability to sing or play music among Semai musicians is achieved and not ascribed. A musician succeeds as one through individual efforts, interest, and diligence. The approach in which the four musicians learn *jenulak* demonstrates that learning is an art that is self-directed. The learner is the most important person in the learning process. This approach adheres to the Semai concept of *tulah* which states that no human should be forced to practice anything beyond their will This learning method is similar to Hands (2017)’s description of *kupingan* and Harisna (2010) details on learning with perseverance in Javanese art of learning. This argument is supported by my fieldwork encounters with three Semai musicians—Saripah, Alang, and Bah Ajis. They are Semai musicians who did not have spiritual encounters with *gunik* when learning *jenulak*.

These testimonies prove that singers who formerly learned sacred *jenulak* had created new *jenulak* that was different from the previous sacred version. This proves that there is individual agency in creating songs among in Semai society. Testimonies from the interviewees reveal that they have not changed any of the song text, melody, rhythm, and style from the previous *jenulak* with supernatural origins. The article also shows that there is a sense of sacredness in *jenulak* that was taught by *gunik* to *halak*. However, this article also shows that Semai musicians who have learned and experienced *jenulak* that have supernatural origins have created their own new *jenulak*. These new *jenulak* are created from their experience of the melody, rhythm, and style of sacred *jenulak*. Newly composed *jenulak* demonstrate the inclusion of new rhythmic patterns and broader melodic structures.

This article is limited to testimonies from elderly musicians from Central Perak, who learned *jenulak* from their deceased *halak* predecessors. The performance of sacred *jenulak* may change today as the concept of *jenulak* with sacred supernatural origins becomes a memory of the past. Each time *jenulak* is performed, it may subtly evolve based on the singer’s habitus—their identity, creativity, and artistic aesthetic as well as their interaction with the local and global forces. As *jenulak* is passed down to the next generation as an oral tradition, it may be modified based on the musician’s musical aesthetics. Gladis (personal communication, August 10, 2022) informed me that the Semai in his village, Pos Kemar, located in Northeast Perak, often improvise new song text based on the *jenulak* tunes related to sacred rituals to sing during different rituals. Some *jenulak* may have origins from spirit guides but over time, these *jenulak* evolve from sacred to secular versions. These versions may be classified as new “arrangements” of *jenulak*. (Anthony Seeger, personal communication, July 23, 2022,). However, I have no evidence to affirm this belief at this point of time. This will be research for future researchers who may refer to my music score and recordings of the current *jenulak*. This article is not able to address

intricate details of how music is transmitted and composed. I recommend close observation of these two approaches for future studies.

The recontextualisation of music that once served a now declining sacred healing context finds its survival as secular songs performed as identity representation of the Semai today. Culture bearers that continue to perform Semai music today do not necessarily have relations with the supernatural, but they played an important role in the sustainability of the Semai musical heritage. This phenomenon may perhaps be the Orang Asli's organic, natural, or even subconscious action toward the sustainability of musical heritage.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> This research was titled “Modernization and Tourism: Reshaping the musical aesthetics of the Orang Asli (Semai) of Ulu Geroh, Gopeng (2011)” funded by the *Geran Penyelidikan Universiti* (GPU), Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris.

<sup>2</sup> Shamans are ranked by degree of adeptness—from the lowest to the highest are the *bomoh*, *dukun* and *pawang*.

<sup>3</sup> This research is titled “Advocating the development of contemporary traditional Orang Asli music as an approach to cultural sustainability” (19 October 2016 - 18 October 2017) and funded by the *Geran Penyelidikan Universiti* (GPU), Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris. Wak Genamun is a mountain princess, a *gunik* that resides in the mountains of Batu 7, Kuala Woh in Tapah, Perak. In this song, Wak Genamun is gleefully playing among the clouds in the sky with her mother. She swings high and low on a swing in the “heavens”.

<sup>4</sup> The music recording was funded by a grant from Cendana Independent Musician (2020-2022). The music album titled “Songs and the Music of the Semai of Tisong” was published online through Apple <https://music.apple.com/cy/artist/semai-of-tisong/1644319967>, YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCM0sF0D17tq-tpuNqsHw3LQ?themeRefresh=1>, and many other channels.

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## Biography

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