Contextualized Worship and Identity Formation in the Malaysian Church

Sooi-Ling Tan, Ph.D.
Malaysia Baptist Seminary

Introduction

Malaysia is a young and diverse nation. Formed in 1963, her population of 28.3 million comprises Malays, Chinese, Indians and over thirty indigenous groups. Malaysia takes extraordinary pride in being showcased as a nation where peoples of different ethnicities, religions and cultures live together in harmony. In reality, inter-ethnic tensions exist due to power inequality created by the dominant Malay-Muslims who hold rights to political power, and privileges in the economic and education sector. This has created potentially divisive fault lines, now further exacerbated by resurgent Islam’s bid to introduce Islamic law in Malaysia. The Malaysian church exists as Ng Kam-Weng aptly describes, “a besieged minority” within this volatile context of rising ethnic polarization and the growing restriction of religious liberties.

The Malaysian church struggles with the issue of identity, and so does the nation. The Malaysian historian Cheah Boon Kheng asserts correctly, “since its birth, Malaysia has lacked a clear cut sense of national identity.” Correspondingly, Malaysian Christians are ambivalent about their Christian-Malaysian identity, a situation partly brought about by the import of western styled Christianity into the Malaysian church life that resulted in a lesser-developed local identity. It is my contention that contextual worship and theology functions to integrate local elements into the church, and thus contributes to the formation of an authentic Malaysian church.

By definition, contextualization of worship simply means creating worship services that are biblically grounded and culturally relevant to the context. The broad goal of this paper is to explore avenues of appropriate contextualized worship for the Malaysian church. A case study of contextualized worship among the Salako people, an indigenous tribe in East Malaysia, will be used as a model to work from. This paper examines and analyzes how the Salako Christians contextualized the Gawai (Harvest) Festival. First, for a general perspective, an overview of the traditional folk-religion Gawai ritual-celebration and the contextualized Christian Gawai worship service is provided. Subsequently, three relevant areas are discussed: the theme of the nature of God, the centrality of sacrifice as a key symbol, and appropriate musical expressions. Each area will be analyzed in light of biblical truth and adjudicated. Finally, some contextualized practices are suggested.

The Context

Located in the island of Borneo, Sarawak is a land of manifold colors and sounds and home to six major and forty sub-ethnic groups, each with their own language and culture. Christianity has grown exponentially from a mere 7.9% of the population in 1947, to 44.18% in 2010, making it the only state with a Christian majority in a largely Islamic-dominant nation. Because of this, the church has the potential to model what it means to be a truly “Malaysian Church” for the nation.

Historically, the music worship of the Sarawak church is like a woven tapestry with many threads. The first thread consists of hymns brought by the Anglican, Methodist, Catholic, and Baptist missionaries after Sarawak became a British colony in 1876. Popular-style praise and worship songs from England, United States and Australia were incorporated in the late 20th century. Added to this tapestry are the pop-rock styled Malay language worship songs from Indonesia that are extremely popular among the younger generation. Herein lies the music worship dilemma: although the state’s tribal communities are rich with their
culture, music and dance, these local expressions are rarely incorporated into the major church services.

Our case study focuses on the Salakos, a tribal group numbering 10,000 people living in Sarawak, Malaysia. Prior to 1985, the vast majority of Salakos adhered to folk religion. By 2006, however, the religious demography has changed. In Pueh, the village where this case study was done, an estimated sixty percent are Christians. The issue of identity is a salient one in this community. Villagers hesitate to convert for fear of being “less Salako” culturally and socially. This concern is because Salako Christians declare their allegiance to Christ by surrendering the family adat (a string of amulets hung outside the doorpost of their house) to the village chief. The adat symbolizes a belonging to the Salako community, customs, and religion. The surrender of the adat implies that they forfeit their old identity. This crisis of identity has sparked efforts to formulate a new Salako Christian identity. Contextualized worship is one of the strategies used.

The Gawai (Harvest) Festival

On June 1, the Salako community (as well as all the indigenous communities of Sarawak) celebrates the Gawai (harvest) festival. The Gawai festival is both a time of thanksgiving and a time of reunion. Salakos living in different parts of Malaysia will journey home to celebrate this festival with family and friends. It is also a cultural showcase in which Salako music, dance, dress, games, food and traditions are displayed. I chose to observe and analyze this festival because embedded in the rituals are the beliefs, values and cultural expressions that enable us to exegete this culture.

Salako Folk Religion Gawai

The folk religion Gawai ritual has two segments: the religious segment called the piring which is held in the paante (patio) outside the longhouse, and the celebratory section held in the ruai (public and shared verandah) inside the long house. Here is a description of the proceedings.

The function of the religious segment is to invoke Jubata’s (the Salako god) presence, as well as to appease and ward off evil spirits believed to bring harm, from the village. The sound of the dalu (gongs) interlocking with the rhythms of the rebana (single-headed frame drums) and gendang (double headed long drums), and the melodic overtones of the tumak (wooden xylophone) signal the start of the festival at 12.01am, on June 1.

Villagers stream out to gather at the paante where seated in the inner circle around an offering plate filled with traditional Salako cakes, rich in bamboo and a whole cooked chicken, are three ritual specialists (village chief, head dancer and cultural committee chairman), and the musicians and dancers. As the music increases in tone and intensity, the headman begins the ceremony by reciting prayers to Jubata, the god of padi, for “safety, prosperity, for blessing, a happy and prosperous year ahead… where there is no sickness.”

As he prays, someone pours air tawar (a special liquid mixture made up of water, tumeric, and flour) on the offerings. The Head Dancer starts small dance movements and stamps his stick according to the rhythm of the music. Subsequently, more prayers are chanted asking for the unseen spirits that cause bad luck and evil to go far away. The headman sprinkles air tawar over the area as a symbolic act of protection. At this time, the dancers begin the religious dance called Tarian Baantar. The village chief later explains that the chief dancer is the “catcher of these (evil) spirits.” Firecracker sounds now punctuate the air. After dancing around the offering plate five times, the prayer ends. The music also stops, signaling the conclusion of this segment.

The ritual specialists and the villagers now move inside the longhouse with the offering plate. All the households lay out their contribution of drinks, bottles of rice wine and
food. As the musicians start off the first song, the chief dancer leads the communal dance around the *ruai*. Young and old get up to join the dance. Rice wine is flowing freely. These dances, drinking and merriment continue on the whole night and end at 4 a.m. in the morning.

**Contextualized Salako Christian Gawai Worship Service**

Three hours before the Salako Folk Gawai began, the church met for the Christian celebration of the Gawai. There are two main segments to this festival celebration: the communal meal and the worship service.

**The Meal Together**

The evening begins with a meal together. As in the folk religion ritual, each family brings a traditional Salako dish. This is a joyous time as family and friends are reunited.

**The Worship Segment**

The worship segment begins with a processional involving four groups of people. As a ten-year-old boy, Firwandi plays the *tumak*, the pastor and church musicians walk into the building. The musicians now take over and play as the elders of the church, villagers from four different villages represented in the church, and those who have received a tangible blessing from God in the last year enter in that order. Pastor Selian explains that this order of entrance is intentional as it follows the Old Testament pattern set in 2 Chronicles 5.

After the processional comes the traditional segment that incorporates local forms of music, poetry, instruments and dance. Five elements make this segment uniquely Salako. First, there is language. The group sang a song in the Salako language titled *Angin batiup agik* (The wind is blowing again).

Second, this song uses the *pantun* genre. The *pantun* is a popular sung-poetic form. For this occasion, the church leaders composed and sang verses containing relevant themes such as the presence and power of God, the permanence of God’s Word, and the powerful name of Jesus in healing and deliverance, while the congregation joined in for the chorus. The *pantun* also featured in the next song, the *ngoncong*. This time, the *pantun* singing is accompanied by the violin played by Ajus ak Koda, and a dance by two elderly ladies. Selian clarifies that traditionally the *ngoncong* is used in healing ceremonies, and now in church it is used to welcome God’s immanent healing power.

The third element is the use of themes that reflect Salako interests: the power, healing, and sovereignty of God. The last two elements include the use of traditional instruments, the *tumak*, *gendang* and *gong*, and the use of traditional Salako dances represented by the ladies’ *ngoncong* and the children’s self-choreographed presentation of two traditional dances (*Tarian Terabang* and *Tarian Totongk’*).

The church then moves quite seamlessly into a time of contemporary praise and worship. The worship band, consisting of two guitarists and a drummer, leads the congregation with three very upbeat contemporary praise songs. The congregation dance in a circle and there is indeed an atmosphere of great rejoicing, festivity and celebration as God’s power is being extolled, His faithfulness declared and his goodness celebrated. The worship then moves to singing slower-tempo worship songs that express their love for God.

Following the musical worship is a spontaneous time of prayer. The congregation then sits to hear the word of God. Pastor Selian preaches from the theme “A procession with Jesus” emphasizing the importance of praise and worship, and the efficacy of the sacrifice of Jesus. The evening ends at 11 p.m. with a blessing. Everyone now adjourns to the longhouse to join the rest of the Salako community for the traditional celebration of the folk religion Gawai.

This section discusses the process of contextualization in three relevant areas. Salako beliefs and practices are examined in light of Scriptures and analyzed critically. The goal is to be grounded biblically and relevant contextually.

The Nature of God: God Is Sovereign

Embedded beliefs about the nature and being of God are critical in determining the appropriate content of worship. From observing Salako folk and Christian Gawai rituals, three pertinent beliefs about God emerge: the sovereignty of God, the goodness of God and the accessibility of God.

**God is Sovereign**

At first glance, both Salako folk religion and Christianity hold to a similar concept of a God who is the Creator of heaven and earth and the source of all life and material blessings. In both cosmoses, there is no rigid separation between heaven and earth. As such, God and spirits influence the heavenly as well as the earthly space. The difficulty with this near-similar concept is that it gives rise to the issue of rival allegiance. If both Jubata and the Christian God are regarded respectively as the Creator of heaven and earth, then they can only demand total allegiance from their respective adherents. When crisis befalls the Salako Christian, a dilemma occurs. Who do they go to for help? God, or Jubata?

For a Christian response, the sovereignty of God is a key theme throughout the Bible. Through descriptive worship, God is proclaimed as sovereign over heaven and earth in Psalm 95. In the New Testament worship, Ralph Martin identifies the lordship of Jesus Christ as one of the three core themes that run through New Testament worship. True worship acknowledges the Lordship of Christ and demands sole allegiance to the Christian God and this is a non-negotiable truth.

God is good

The operating word in the folk religion ritual is for Jubata to “keep away.” The fact that (a) the religious segment is held outside the longhouse and (b) the content of the ritual prayer indicate that Jubata is viewed as unhappy and in need of appeasement. On the other hand, the Christian God is warmly invited into all homes and worship space.

Underlying this act is the conviction of goodness as an attribute of God. This belief is exemplified in Moses’ dialogue with YHWH in Exod. 33:12-34:9. Moses asks YHWH to reveal His presence and glory and YHWH obliges. “And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, ‘The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.’” To this, Christopher Cocksworth comments, “God reveals He is beyond any material depiction. He simply exists. But God can be defined by a moral description. He is the God of steadfast love and faithfulness, full of grace and mercy, rich in forgiveness and committed to justice.”

This is a wonderful understanding of the goodness of God. At the same time, we cannot deny the existence of evil and the crippling brokenness of the world today. And just like the Psalmist in Psalm 73, the church wrestles with the issue of theodicy. However, the hope of the church lies in God’s goodness demonstrated in Christ’s incarnation, death and resurrection, that ultimately seals the victory of good over evil.

God Is Accessible

Upon ascertaining that God is good, the other question is, “Is God accessible?” In the Salako folk religious world, Jubata is not accessible to every person, as can be seen by the
presence of ritual specialists who act as mediators. For the Christian community, the boldness to come before a living God is well grounded in Scriptures. In John 4, Jesus declares this inauguration of a new order and the possibility of a relationship with God as Father. New Testament churches celebrate Christ’s finished work on the cross that makes access to God possible, as their central theme (Eph. 3:12, Eph. 2:18, Rom 5:12).

Centrality of the Concept of Sacrifice

Sacrifice and offerings are central symbols of Salako folk religion beliefs. Interestingly, this aspect correlates with Christianity as sacrifice is a prominent symbol in the Old Testament temple and with Jesus Christ as the atoning sacrifice in the New Testament (Rom. 3:25). The difference, however, lies in the meaning and nature of this sacrifice. The adherents of the Salako folk religion present their sacrifices as a thanksgiving to Jubata, but also to appease Jubata and the evil spirits. For the Christians, the sacrifice of Jesus Christ atones sin, thus bridging the gulf between God and human beings.

Furthermore, the nature of this new relationship is an intimate father-child relationship. This intimate concept of family thus stands in complete juxtaposition to Jubata’s relationship to human beings, in which Jubata is distant, uncommitted and definitely needs constant placation. Additionally, unlike the folk religion sacrifice, Christ’s sacrifice is perfect, sufficient and complete (Hebrews 10:1-10).

How then do Salakos celebrate this biblical truth of Jesus as sacrifice in a culturally conscious way? Let us establish that there can be no compromise regarding the truth and implications of Jesus Christ’s sacrifice. However, a useful starting point is two shared understandings of sacrifice. First, the Salako folk religion believes that the “blood shed” (by the chicken) has purifying qualities. This belief correlates with the efficacy of the “blood shed” by Christ. Second, both rituals reveal a need for a mediator between human beings and God. Christians can build upon these shared understandings and share further about the sacrifice of Jesus that is once for all and sufficient.

Worship Expressions

Music and dance play a vital role in Salako culture. In the folk religion Gawai, the musicians’ role is indispensable for “without the music, the ritual cannot proceed.” It is believed that music provides the semangat (life and energy) of the ritual. The following is a discussion of the forms and functions of music expression for the Salakos. How then can we contextualize music expressions in this society?

Music Form: The Old and New

During the Gawai festival, it is clear that the Salakos seamlessly embrace different musical forms. Upon analysis, four broad genres of musical style can be identified in a continuum (Figure 1). On the extreme left are ritual chants used in prayers to invoke and appease spirits. These contain wholly local elements. Most of the music used during the Gawai fall either under the categories of syncretic (or acculturated) music or contemporary popular music.

![Figure 1: Music Styles of the Salakos, Sarawak](image-url)
Syncretic music differs from ritual chant music because it is used for entertainment rather than for religious purposes. This music combines local elements with foreign elements from Arab, Persian, Indian, Chinese and Western musical and theatrical sources.\(^\text{14}\) An example is the *ngoncong* in which the violin, an instrument brought to Malaya by the Portuguese in the 16th century, plays a variation of the vocal melody and combines with the rhythms of the local gongs and drums.\(^\text{15}\)

Moving on in the continuum is social popular music. It is music that combines social popular Malay language songs with social popular dance patterns such as the *ronggeng*. In 2006, a song entitled *Sebaya baya Repo* (Let us be happy together) was written by Oppege for the Gawai. This song largely uses the western popular music genre, but retains some local flavor. The band plays Western instruments such as the electric guitar, bass guitar, synthesizer and drums. The local flavor is retained by the sound of the *tumak* that carries the melody in the pentatonic scale and the *gendang* drums. The rhythm of the song adopts the social popular forms of *dangdut*. This highly popular song is a good example of how a contextualized song can be formulated.

*Function of music making in Salako society.*

As mentioned earlier, music is largely used for entertainment in the Salako community. Another function of music is to communicate. “When they (village people) hear the *gendang* and *gong*, it signals to them that the event is starting and it is time to come. In the past, when a person is lost in the jungle, the gong is sounded so that the person can walk in the direction of the sound,” explains Selian.\(^\text{16}\)

A point of concern for contextualization is that music-making also has spiritual associations. Throughout the world, the idea of an instrument having a spiritual connection is widely accepted. In Buddhism, the conch shell is believed to produce the voice of Buddha symbolically. The Japanese *Shakuhachi*, a Japanese flute, is believed to have a spiritual connection with nature.\(^\text{17}\)

Similarly in Malaysia, the *Temiar*, an indigenous group living in West Malaysia, believe that songs are derived from dreams and have the power to cure illness. The shaman receives his songs from a spirit source and reenacts them during a healing ceremony known as the *Sewang* ritual.\(^\text{18}\) This concept is also very well understood in the Salako world. The village chief explains that, when played, the *tingkakok*, a music instrument, invokes the spirits to come and effect healing.\(^\text{19}\)

How do we critically respond to this situation? Perhaps we can learn from the Salako Christians who have been wrestling with this issue for a period of time. For the Christians, folk ritual chants are not used because they are too closely associated with the folk religion beliefs. On the other hand, syncretic music forms are used and are accepted in the church.

From the analysis, evidence suggests that syncretic music, in particular social popular music, is appropriate for contextualizing worship songs for two reasons: (a) syncretic music uses elements of traditional music as a base and this maintains a Salako local identity, and (b) this genre has the flexibility to incorporate elements of modern music that make it relevant to the present generation. An example of this is the popular Salako Christian song *Bejaan Ngan Yesus* (Walking with Jesus) that fuses contemporary popular music with *dangdut*, a social popular type of music and contains lyrics that speak of the faithfulness of Jesus even when times are difficult.

**Conclusion**

The effort made to contextualize the *Gawai* worship service appropriately is a step towards formulating and reinforcing a Salako Christian identity. These efforts continue when thirty musicians and poets gathered in September 2014 for a songwriting workshop. Furthermore, the church through its contextualization efforts has extended her influence to a
wider community. At one time they were a small and persecuted marginal community, but now they play a key role in the cultural renewal of the Salako community. It is my expressed hope that this case study will help provide an example of appropriate contextualization for the wider Malaysian church as they journey towards fully expressing what it means to be – a Malaysian and a Christian.

5 Rowan, Proclaiming the Peacemaker, 194.
6 Department of Statistics, 2010.
9 Ibid
12 Village Chief, 2006.
15 Ibid, 332.
16 Salian Jistar, Personal interview with author, 2006.