

Traditional Malay Music of Riau: Cultural Identity and its Implications for Humanistic Music Education

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ABSTRACT: This study examines the traditional music of the Riau Malay community as a cultural practice that represents collective identity and explores its implications for humanistic music education. Employing a qualitative conceptual design based on a systematic literature review, this research synthesizes studies in ethnomusicology, praxial philosophy of music education, culturally sustaining pedagogy, and UNESCO's framework on intangible cultural heritage. The analysis reveals that Riau Malay traditional music conveys social, moral, and spiritual values through communal musical practices, functioning not only as an artistic expression but also as a medium for transmitting cultural knowledge and shaping collective identity. The findings indicate that integrating traditional music into music education can expand pedagogical goals from technical skill acquisition to the development of empathy, cultural awareness, ethical sensitivity, and meaningful learning experiences. Furthermore, such integration supports the sustainability of intangible cultural heritage by fostering intergenerational transmission, community involvement, and creative continuity. This study contributes theoretically by bridging ethnomusicology and humanistic music education, and practically by offering a conceptual foundation for culturally grounded pedagogical design. The study advocates for music education that is contextually relevant, culturally sustaining, and oriented toward human flourishing in multicultural societies.

KEYWORDS: traditional music, cultural identity, humanistic music education, culturally sustaining pedagogy, intangible cultural heritage, Riau Malay

1. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary humanities studies, music is no longer understood solely as an aesthetic artifact, but rather as a cultural practice that represents the way humans construct meaning, negotiate identity, and regulate social relations. Ethnomusicology positions music as a social practice, namely an activity that is always bound to the historical context, social structure, value system, and collective experience of a community (Nettl, 2015; Rice, 2014). For this reason, traditional music can be seen as a "living archive" that preserves cultural memory, social ethics, and local knowledge passed down from generation to generation. This perspective aligns with global attention to intangible cultural heritage, which highlights the strategic role of traditional arts in preserving the sustainability of cultural identity amidst modernity (UNESCO, 2023).

There has been a paradigm shift in music education from a performance oriented technical approach to a more humanistic perspective. Music education is no longer aimed solely at producing musical skills, but at facilitating holistic human development, encompassing aesthetic, ethical, social, and cultural dimensions. The philosophy of praxial music education emphasizes that learning music occurs through musicking, which is active engagement in musical practices that are socially meaningful and morally reflective (Elliott & Silverman, 2017). In this way, the goal of music education does not stop at competence, but at achieving human flourishing, namely the ability of individuals to live meaningful lives, relate empathetically, and contribute positively to their communities.

This idea is expanded through the concepts of meaningfulness and collective flourishing in music education. Silverman (2023) asserts that meaningful musical experiences grow from social relationships, a sense of belonging, collective participation, and an awareness of goals that transcend individual interests. Music classes are understood as social spaces where values, identities, and shared responsibilities are negotiated through artistic practice. Therefore, humanistic music education requires learning resources that are not only musically rich but also rich in social context and cultural values, so that learning is not detached from the realities of students' lives.

In the Indonesian context, traditional Riau Malay music is a cultural expression that represents the close relationship between art, customs, and the social life of the Malay community. This music has developed in various social settings, such as traditional ceremonies, religious celebrations, life cycle events, and community gatherings, so its function goes beyond mere entertainment. The musical structure, instruments, and presentation reflect a value system that emphasizes social harmony, politeness, and

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togetherness. As a living cultural practice, traditional Malay music from Riau contains local knowledge that has great potential to become a source of humanities learning.

Historically, Malay cultural identity cannot be separated from Islam as the foundation of social ethics and spirituality. This relationship is reflected in the themes, context of performances, and function of music that is often present in religious rituals and traditional ceremonies. Values such as manners, social responsibility, simplicity, and gratitude are not only taught normatively, but also experienced through musical practices that emphasize togetherness and social order. From a humanistic music education perspective, this dimension is important because it opens up space for integration between aesthetic learning and character building. The spread of globalization and the dominance of popular culture pose serious challenges to the sustainability of traditional music. In many formal educational contexts, traditional music is still often positioned as peripheral or symbolic content, taught without in-depth exploration of its values, context, and social functions. As a result, musical traditions risk being reduced to performative objects detached from their humanistic meaning. The framework of culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2017; Barton, 2022) has emerged as a response to this situation, emphasizing that education must not only be responsive to cultural diversity, but also actively preserve and enliven the cultural identities of learners through critical and sustainable learning practices.

This agenda is in line with UNESCO's policy on education based on intangible cultural heritage, which places schools as strategic spaces for the meaningful transmission of traditions. UNESCO programs and guidelines emphasize that cultural preservation cannot be separated from educational processes that involve the communities that own the traditions, direct practice, and critical reflection on cultural meaning (UNESCO, 2023; UNESCO Toolkit, 2024). Thus, music education has dual potential, namely as a means of human development and as a mechanism for cultural sustainability.

Based on this background, this study aims to analyze traditional Malay music in Riau as a representation of the cultural identity of the Malay community and to formulate its implications for humanistic music education. The novelty of this study lies in its attempt to position traditional music not only as an ethnomusicological descriptive object, but also as a source of humanities learning that can develop meaningfulness, cultural literacy, social empathy, and collective flourishing among students. By integrating the perspectives of ethnomusicology, praxial music education philosophy, and culturally sustaining pedagogy, this study is expected to contribute to the development of locally-based music education that is globally relevant and sustainable.

2. LITERATUR REVIEW

2.1 Traditional Music as a Social Practice and Cultural Identity

Modern ethnomusicology views music as a social practice that is always tied to the context of community life. Nettl (2015) and Rice (2014) emphasize that the meaning of music cannot be separated from the performers, the performance situation, cultural functions, and the value systems that surround it. Traditional music is thus not merely a structure of sound, but a symbolic expression that represents how a community understands the world and its position within it.

Cultural identity is understood as a dynamic construct formed through symbolic practices, language, rituals, and art, including music (Hall, 1996). In Malay society, traditional music functions as a medium for articulating traditional values, religiosity, and social structures that emphasize harmony and collectivity. Therefore, traditional Riau Malay music can be positioned as a representation of cultural identity that is alive and continuously negotiated in contemporary social dynamics.

2.2 Humanistic Music Education and Praxial Philosophy

Humanistic music education is rooted in the view that the primary goal of education is the development of the whole person. Elliott and Silverman (2017), through praxial philosophy, emphasize that learning music is a participatory process that involves experience, reflection, and social meaning. Music is not studied as an abstract object, but as a cultural practice that is rich in values and purpose. Silverman (2023) expands this framework by emphasizing the importance of meaningfulness and collective flourishing in music education. Music classes are seen as spaces for the formation of empathy, identity, and social responsibility. Thus, humanistic music education places music as a means of character building, cultural awareness, and ethics of living together.

2.3 Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy in Music Education

Culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) was developed as a critique of education that only accommodates local culture superficially. Paris and Alim (2017) emphasize that education must preserve, develop, and empower the culture of learners as a legitimate source of knowledge. In music education, this approach encourages the use of local musical traditions as the foundation for learning.

Barton (2022) and the latest systematic review (CSP in Music Education Review, 2025) show that local culture-based music learning increases emotional engagement, a sense of belonging, cultural identity formation, and meaningful learning experiences. In this context, traditional Riau Malay music has great potential as a pedagogical resource that integrates musical learning with humanities values.

2.4 Traditional Music and Intangible Cultural Heritage in Education

UNESCO defines intangible cultural heritage as practices, expressions, knowledge, and skills that are passed down from generation to generation and continuously recreated by communities (UNESCO, 2023). Education is seen as one of the main pillars of the sustainability of this heritage.

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The living heritage-based educational approach emphasizes contextual learning, community involvement, direct experience, and critical reflection on cultural meaning. In music education, this framework reinforces the position of traditional music as a means of learning values, identity, and cultural responsibility, rather than merely an object of performance or additional curriculum material.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative approach with a conceptual analytical study design based on systematic literature review. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to examine the socio-cultural meaning of traditional music and its pedagogical implications through interdisciplinary theoretical synthesis (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Snyder, 2019). Data were obtained from internationally reputable peer-reviewed journal articles (Scopus and Web of Science), academic books, and official UNESCO documents relevant to ethnomusicology, cultural identity, humanistic music education, praxial philosophy, and culturally sustaining pedagogy, with a focus on publications from 2015 to 2025. The literature search was conducted in a structured manner through academic databases using thematic keywords such as traditional music, cultural identity, humanistic music education, and intangible cultural heritage, following the principles of transparency and replicability of systematic literature reviews (Booth, Sutton, & Papaioannou, 2016). Data analysis was conducted using thematic content analysis, which included initial coding, theme grouping, and conceptual synthesis to identify patterns of relationship between Riau Malay traditional music, cultural identity formation, and its implications for humanistic music education (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). To maintain academic rigor, this study applied scientific quality-based source selection, cross-disciplinary literature triangulation, and systematic documentation of the analysis process to enhance the credibility and traceability of interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). This approach enables the formulation of a coherent and scientifically accountable conceptual framework regarding the role of traditional music as a source of humanities learning in music education.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Malay Traditional Music of Riau as a Representation of Cultural Identity

The results of the literature synthesis show that traditional Riau Malay music functions as a symbolic system that represents the collective cultural identity of the Malay community. Musical structure, choice of instruments, performance context, and music inheritance practices form a “cultural language” that marks the way people understand themselves and their world. From an ethnomusicological perspective, this practice confirms the thesis that music is a social practice that articulates the relationship between individuals, communities, and cultural values that are passed down across generations (Nettl, 2015; Rice, 2014). Thus, music is not only produced to be heard, but also to be interpreted as an expression of the social existence of a cultural group. Malay cultural identity is reflected through the values of politeness, social balance, and respect for customs that are present in performance ethics, musical procedures, and the relationship between performers and audiences. Music does not stand as an individualistic activity, but rather as a collective action that affirms the existence of the community as a social unit. Patterns of musical interaction, such as deliberation in determining repertoire, division of roles among players, and respect for traditional leaders and religious leaders, reflect the social structure of Malay society, which places harmony and consensus as the main principles of communal life.

Beyond that, the practice of traditional Malay music in Riau also serves as a mechanism for transmitting values and collective memory. Through oral learning, imitation, and direct involvement in performances, the younger generation not only inherits musical techniques but also absorbs behavioral norms, social ethics, and perspectives on life. In this framework, music becomes a medium for informal cultural education that instills identity from an early age, so that culture is not only preserved as a symbol of the past, but is also kept alive in everyday social experiences.

With all the social changes brought on by urbanization, technology, and cultural globalization, traditional Riau Malay music also acts as a space for cultural resistance. While modern music consumption patterns tend to be individualistic and commercial, traditional music practices maintain a communal orientation and values of togetherness. By continuing to be performed in traditional rituals, religious celebrations, and important social events, traditional music affirms the continuity of the Malay identity as one rooted in tradition and religiosity, while remaining adaptive to changing times without losing its fundamental meaning.

As such, traditional Malay music from Riau cannot be understood merely as an artistic product, but rather as a social process that continuously reproduces cultural identity in a contemporary context. It becomes a meeting place between the past and the present, between traditional values and modern realities, and between individuals and communities. From a humanistic music education perspective, understanding this identity function is an important foundation for making traditional music not just an object of technical learning, but a source of cultural reflection and collective self-awareness for students.

4.2 The Humanistic Dimension in the Practice of Traditional Malay Music in Riau

Literature analysis shows that traditional Malay music practices in Riau contain strong humanistic dimensions, particularly in the formation of moral values, social empathy, and spiritual awareness. Values such as responsibility, simplicity, mutual respect, and togetherness are not conveyed through normative verbal doctrines, but are internalized through direct involvement in collective

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musical activities. The process of collective music-making places individuals in social relationships that demand sensitivity, discipline, and appreciation for the roles of others, so that music functions as a space for experiential ethical learning, rather than simply being taught.

Within the framework of humanities, art is understood as a means of shaping human meaning and existential awareness. Riau Malay traditional music, with its social and ritual context, presents an aesthetic experience that is inseparable from the daily life of the community. This musical experience shapes the way individuals feel togetherness, understand their own limits, and place collective interests above personal interests. Thus, the practice of traditional music not only produces artistic expression, but also builds a structure of feeling that supports the social life of the Malay community.

This humanistic dimension is also reflected in the way music teaches social empathy. In performances and joint rehearsals, players learn to read the expressions, tempo, and musical responses of their peers, which indirectly trains their sensitivity to the emotional states of others. This process strengthens their ability to listen, wait, adapt, and give space also social competencies that form the foundation of harmonious interpersonal relationships. In the context of Malay society, which upholds manners and social harmony, this function becomes very significant.

In addition, traditional Malay music in Riau has a close connection with the spiritual dimension. The presence of music in religious rituals and traditional ceremonies shows that musical practices are inseparable from transcendental consciousness. Music becomes a medium for expressing gratitude, submission, and self-reflection before the Divine. This spiritual dimension enriches the musical experience, making it not only aesthetic but also contemplative, thereby strengthening the function of music as a means of shaping inner awareness and psychological balance.

From a humanistic educational perspective, aesthetic experiences connected to these life values are in line with the view that art serves as a medium for shaping personality and ethical awareness (Noddings, 2013; Silverman, 2023). Riau Malay traditional music provides an affective learning space that allows students to directly experience how social values are practiced in a real context, rather than simply being learned conceptually through texts or lectures.

Moreover, learning through traditional musical practices opens up a space for dialogue between generations. The interaction between older and younger artists in the process of musical inheritance enables the transfer of values, attitudes, and life wisdom that are not always explicitly formulated. This tradition makes music a medium for experience-based character education, where moral authority is not imposed but grows through example and shared participation.

The humanistic dimension of Riau Malay traditional music is therefore not an addition, but rather inherent in its practice. Music becomes a space for human development rooted in the social, spiritual, and cultural values of the community. This understanding reinforces the argument that traditional music should be positioned as a primary source of humanities learning in music education, rather than merely as enrichment material or an object of cultural preservation.

4.3 Implications for Humanistic Music Education

The conceptual findings of this study confirm that traditional Malay music from Riau has great potential as a pedagogical foundation in humanistic music education. The integration of traditional music into learning enables a shift in the orientation of music education, from mastery of technique and repertoire to the development of character, cultural awareness, and social sensitivity in students. Thus, music learning functions not only as skill training, but as a process of holistic human development.

From a praxial philosophical perspective, music learning based on local traditions allows students to engage in meaningful musicking because these practices are directly related to their social and cultural lives (Elliott & Silverman, 2017). This engagement increases intrinsic motivation, a sense of ownership of the learning process, and the relevance of learning to the daily realities of students. Music is not studied as foreign material, but as part of one's identity and community.

Another implication is the opening up of a broader space for affective and reflective learning. Through traditional music practices, students learn to manage their emotions, develop empathy, and understand the importance of social roles in collective work. This process strengthens the socio-emotional dimension of education, which is often neglected in curricula that place too much emphasis on cognitive and technical achievements.

Humanistic music education based on local traditions also contributes to strengthening students' cultural identity. Amidst the tide of cultural globalization, traditional music education serves as a means of identity affirmation, helping students recognize their cultural roots and build pride in their local heritage. A strong cultural identity has been shown to correlate with increased self-confidence, emotional stability, and active engagement in learning.

From a curriculum perspective, the integration of traditional music requires a shift in learning design from a uniform model to a contextual and flexible approach. Music teachers no longer act solely as technical instructors, but as cultural facilitators who bridge musical knowledge with the social values and life experiences of students. This opens up opportunities for the development of contextual teaching materials, collaborative methods, and authentic assessments that evaluate process, participation, and reflection, rather than just musical products.

This approach is also in line with the principles of culturally sustaining pedagogy, which places the culture of students as the main epistemological source in learning. By utilizing traditional Riau Malay music as core material, music education can contribute to

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active cultural preservation, rather than merely symbolic preservation. Schools become living spaces for tradition, rather than merely spaces for the transmission of formal knowledge.

This integration also has broader social implications, namely strengthening the relationship between schools and cultural communities. The involvement of traditional artists, indigenous leaders, and local communities in the learning process enriches the learning experience of students while restoring the social function of schools as cultural centers. This synergy enables music education to serve as a bridge between the academic world and the cultural life of the community.

Consequently, humanistic music education based on traditional Riau Malay music is not only pedagogically relevant, but also culturally and socially strategic. It offers a learning model that combines individual development, identity preservation, and cultural sustainability within a meaningful and humanistic educational framework.

4.4 Integration of Traditional Music within the Framework of Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

The results of the discussion show a strong correlation between the use of traditional Riau Malay music and the principles of culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP). This approach emphasizes that education is not enough to simply accommodate or “celebrate” local culture symbolically, but must actively preserve, develop, and transform it as a source of knowledge that is alive and relevant to the current generation (Paris & Alim, 2017; Barton, 2022). Within this framework, culture is not positioned as a passive backdrop to learning, but as an epistemological center that shapes how learners understand themselves and their world.

In the context of music education, the use of traditional Riau Malay music as core learning material can avoid tokenistic pedagogical practices, namely treating traditional music as mere “examples of regional songs” or curriculum inserts without processing their social meaning and cultural values. Instead, traditional music is positioned as an epistemological framework, that is, a way of knowing and understanding the world through one's own cultural practices: how sounds are produced, for what purpose, in what social situations, and with what values accompanying them. This approach allows students to learn music while also learning about their society.

CSP further demands learning that not only preserves traditional forms, but also opens up space for creative transformation that remains rooted in local values. In music education, this can be achieved through contextual arrangements, cross-generational collaboration, and exploration of new performance forms that continue to respect Malay aesthetic and ethical principles. Thus, traditional music is not frozen as an artifact of the past, but is brought to life as an adaptive and meaningful cultural practice for today's students.

This approach also contributes to the decolonization of music curricula, which have tended to be dominated by Western repertoires and certain global aesthetic standards. The integration of traditional Riau Malay music as a primary source of learning challenges the assumption that legitimate musical knowledge can only come from European traditions or specific notation systems. Instead, local musical knowledge is recognized as a complex, rational, and academically valuable system, thereby strengthening the cultural legitimacy of Malay music in the global educational discourse.

From a pedagogical perspective, CSP encourages a shift in the role of music teachers from content deliverers to cultural mediators. Teachers not only teach playing techniques, but also help students interpret the social meaning of music, connect it to their life experiences, and reflect on the values it contains. This process fosters dialogic learning that values the voices of students and community experiences as part of legitimate knowledge.

The integration of traditional music into the CSP framework also opens up broader opportunities for collaboration between schools and cultural communities. The involvement of traditional artists, indigenous leaders, and local cultural practitioners in the learning process enriches the perspectives of students while preventing traditions from being reduced to mere classroom material. Learning becomes a participatory process that connects educational institutions with cultural practices that are alive in the community.

In addition to its impact on learning, this approach has broader social implications, namely strengthening the sense of belonging and cultural dignity of local communities. When traditional music is taught as valuable knowledge in schools, students and their communities gain symbolic recognition that their culture is important and worth preserving. This contributes to the formation of a positive identity and resistance to the marginalization of local cultures in the tide of globalization.

The integration of traditional Riau Malay music within the framework of culturally sustaining pedagogy is therefore not only methodologically relevant, but also culturally and politically strategic. It enables music education to function as a space for active preservation, creative transformation, and cultural identity empowerment, while expanding the meaning of education as a process of humanizing people through the culture in which they live.

4.5 Music Education and the Sustainability of Intangible Cultural Heritage

From a cultural sustainability perspective, the integration of traditional Riau Malay music into music education is in line with the agenda of protecting intangible cultural heritage, which places education as one of the most effective means of ensuring the transmission of cultural values, practices, and meanings across generations. Tradition is not understood as a static relic, but rather as a living practice that can only survive if it continues to be studied, practiced, and reinterpreted by younger generations in the context of their own times.

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Within this framework, schools and educational institutions function not only as academic spaces, but also as cultural ecosystems that enable encounters between formal knowledge and traditional knowledge. Music education serves as a bridge between the community and the school, between life experiences and the curriculum structure, so that the process of cultural inheritance is not interrupted by social and technological changes.

Through contextual and reflective formal learning, students not only learn musical forms, but also understand the social functions, moral values, and symbolic meanings of these traditions. This process transforms traditional music from a mere object of study into a cultural experience that is personally and collectively experienced, felt, and interpreted. Thus, music education plays a dual role as a vehicle for human development and as a mechanism for dynamic cultural preservation.

The sustainability of cultural heritage cannot be achieved solely through documentation or archival preservation, but requires the regeneration of cultural practitioners who have an emotional attachment and cultural identity to their traditions. Music education provides a systematic space to build this attachment through joint practice, performances, reflection on values, and intergenerational dialogue. In this context, students are not only learners, but also future inheritors and guardians of tradition.

Moreover, the integration of traditional music in education helps prevent the narrow commodification of culture, namely the tendency to treat traditions as mere spectacles or tourism products without understanding their social significance. With a reflective pedagogical approach, traditional music is positioned as a meaningful practice that has cultural dignity, not merely an aesthetic commodity. This is important in order to ensure that the preservation process does not eliminate the ethical and spiritual values inherent in tradition.

Music education also allows for directed creative adaptation, where traditions can evolve without losing their fundamental identity. Students can be encouraged to explore new forms of presentation, digital media, or cross-genre collaborations, while still understanding Malay aesthetic principles and cultural values. Thus, sustainability is not interpreted as rigid conservation, but as creative continuity that is conscious of its cultural roots.

From a social perspective, traditional music education in schools strengthens the relationship between young people and local cultural communities. The involvement of traditional artists and community leaders in the educational process fosters respect for local knowledge and reinforces the position of the community as a subject, rather than an object, in cultural preservation. This relationship expands the function of schools as centers of learning as well as centers of culture.

Music education based on Riau Malay traditions contributes directly to the sustainability of intangible cultural heritage, not only by preserving its musical form, but also by fostering awareness, responsibility, and cultural pride in future generations. In the long term, this approach strengthens the cultural resilience of the Malay community in the face of global homogenization while affirming the role of education as a strategic space for the continuity of identity and humanity.

V. CONCLUSIONS

This study confirms that traditional Malay music in Riau is not merely an artistic expression, but a cultural practice that represents the identity, social values, and worldview of the Malay community. From a humanistic music education perspective, traditional music has great potential as a source of humanities learning that can develop empathy, cultural awareness, moral character, and meaningful learning for students.

Through the integration of ethnomusicology, praxial music education philosophy, and culturally sustaining pedagogy, this study shows that local tradition-based music learning can enrich the goals of music education from mere technical mastery to the formation of well-rounded individuals. Music education not only produces individuals who are musically skilled, but also cultural subjects who are rooted in their identity and able to live reflectively in a multicultural society. In addition, music education based on traditional Riau Malay music plays a strategic role in maintaining the sustainability of intangible cultural heritage through cross-generational transmission of values, community involvement, and creative adaptation that remains rooted in tradition. Thus, music education serves a dual function as a vehicle for human development and as a mechanism for the preservation of living culture. In addition, this study emphasizes the importance of curriculum reorientation, strengthening the role of teachers as cultural facilitators, and developing arts education policies that support local cultural diversity. These efforts form the foundation for music education that is not only globally relevant but also locally and humanistically meaningful.

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