

Narratives In Melody: Exploring Folk Tales in Terengganu's Traditional Songs

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DOI Link: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v15-i10/26766>

Published Date: 26 October 2025

Abstract

Global folk narratives have evolved in tandem with the development of human civilization and remain a vital part of cultural heritage worldwide. However, numerous traditional art forms, including Terengganu's folk songs, are experiencing a decline due to the forces of modernization, technological advancement, and the waning of oral traditions. This study is driven by the need to preserve and reinterpret these folk songs as living cultural narratives that embody Malaysia's intangible heritage. Concentrating on the state of Terengganu, the research explores the folk narratives embedded in traditional songs to identify their thematic structures, symbolic meanings, and socio-cultural functions. Employing an ethnographic approach supported by interviews and participant observation, the collected data were analysed qualitatively using NVivo 12. The findings indicate that these folk narratives are multifaceted, reflecting the people's beliefs, values, moral consciousness, and even subtle political undertones. This study contributes to sustaining and enriching Malay oral literature by documenting and interpreting the thematic depth of Terengganu's folk songs, thereby providing a foundation for future scholarship in cultural studies and heritage preservation.

Keywords: Folk narratives, Traditional Folk Songs, Terengganu, Oral Literature, Cultural Heritage

Introduction

Global folk narratives developed in parallel with the evolution of society and are often regarded as the heritage of any civilisation. While this study centred on Terengganu, the main goal was to elaborate on folk narratives presented in the traditional folk songs of Terengganu. For this study, the aim is to analyse folk tales presented in the folk songs of Terengganu. This study utilises ethnographic strategies as the primary data collection method, supplemented by interviews and participant observation. Qualitative analysis using NVivo12 software was

used to interpret the gathered data. The results show that interpretations of folk narratives in Terengganu folk songs are not straightforward but rather complex. The study also indicates that many folk songs were actually composed politically and represent the local community's value system. This research will be helpful to stakeholders whose purpose is to document and preserve the oral literature of Malays for future generations.

As writing emerged in the Malay world, oral literature continued to develop in traditional Malay societies. This was mainly because writing was limited to the nobility and royal households (Che Yaa'cob & Abd Rahim, 2014). With the onset of modernisation, oral literature was still being actively preserved and passed on, as it represented the values of tradition and the uncomplicated life of bygone eras. Unlike in the past, contemporary folk literature is documented as much as it is recited; it can be found in books, newspapers, and magazines, which enhances its availability and relevance in today's society.

Moreover, traditional societies employed folk tales to teach lessons, provide guidance, and share knowledge with people at all levels, including villagers, farmers, and fishermen. For example, popular tales such as Bawang Putih Bawang Merah, Si Tanggang, and Hikayat Sang Kancil are still memorised and passed down these days. These tales could safeguard good manners and serve to entertain. Thus, folk tales are of particular importance to the Malay society's civilisation as they instil its hallmark values that aid in cultivating a noble and high-quality society (Che Yaacob & Abd Rahim, 2016).

The introduction of folk narratives into traditional songs and their usage in Western countries dates back to the mid-1700s, although evidence of their existence can be traced back to the 14th century. These folk narratives were usually performed as part of a more informal, entertaining teaching method. The singing of folk tales makes them more appealing for enhancing language skills, especially among children. The combination of narrative and music enables better understanding and retention of words. This is not only common in Western countries; many Asian countries have also used folk songs to preserve their cultures. In Indonesia, for example, Papua has a popular folk song 'Apuse' which tells a folk story and is used by many teachers as a song to teach in schools (Dinny, 2019).

Apuse kokon dao.

Yarabe soren doreri.

Wuf lenso bani nema baki pase.

(Source: Dinny, 2019)

As per the lyrics, the song narrates the story of grandparents saying goodbye to their grandchild, heading off to Teluk Doreri in Manokwari. Doreri Bay is a prominent port for both national and inter-island shipping. The story encapsulated in this song features elements of respect within the family structure, especially a child's manners toward parents, and a bold optimism about one's self-direction (Widjajanti, 2016). Apuse clearly illustrates a folk song that offers rich moral teachings and cultural wisdom to society as a whole.

The same goes for the presence of folk song narratives in Malaysia. One of the most popular traditional songs loved by both children and adults is Dondang Sayang. The song was composed to entertain merchants who passed through Melaka in the 15th century during the rule of Sultan Mansur Shah of the Malacca Sultanate (Mara, 2020). Dondang Sayang has roots

in a form of traditional poetry that was popularised by the Malay and Peranakan Malay communities in Malaysia and Singapore. In the context of the folk song, *dondang* means 'to sing' and *sayang* means 'love'; therefore, this song was used as a medium to convey love and tenderness (Kamarou Zaman, 2017).

*Pisang mas bawak blayer,
Masak sa-bijik di-atas peti;
Hutang mas boleh di bayer,
Hutang budi menanggung hati.
(Source: Nash, 2014)*

The lyrics of *Dondang Sayang* demonstrate expressions of love and tenderness which have led to it being one of the mainstays of performance at state ceremonies. The lines '*Hutang mas boleh dibayar*' (a debt of gold can be repaid) imply that material debts can be paid off if offset with something equivalent. While '*Hutang budi menanggung hati*' is more insidious, a moral debt incurred through kindness and well-wishing is far deeper and more difficult to repay, and so it embeds itself within the heart. Therefore, *Dondang Sayang* continues to be performed today, although younger Malaysians do not appreciate its historical and cultural relevance.

This illustrates how folk tales embedded in traditional songs constitute oral literature once narrated by *penglipur lara*, traditional storytellers who were accompanied by live traditional music for the entertainment of earlier communities. These songs contained narratives rich in moral and social values and were intended to be practised by all sections of society. It was the responsibility of the *penglipur lara* to captivate their audiences, and many of them were illiterate. To do this, they had to master performance, including dramatisation, body movement, intonation, rhythm, and playing of traditional instruments. It is now our responsibility to safeguard those lyrical accounts of ancient people. The creative heritage of our ancestors, which is transmitted to us, should be appreciated before it disappears into history. Hence, this study intends to analyse folk stories within the songs of the people from Terengganu and uncover the folk themes from the traditional songs.

Research Aims and Study Area

Folk tales and mythologies represent a vital component of cultural heritage, reflecting the values, beliefs, and lived experiences of communities across generations. These narratives often serve as informal channels of moral education, social instruction, and cultural preservation. However, in today's rapidly modernising society, folk tales and traditional songs are increasingly neglected, particularly among younger generations who tend to perceive them as outdated forms of entertainment. This gradual decline underscores the urgent need to document and reinterpret such traditions before they disappear from public consciousness.

Motivated by this concern, the present study aims to analyse the folk narratives embedded within traditional folk songs from the state of Terengganu. The research focuses explicitly on Kuala Terengganu, an area renowned for its rich oral traditions and active community of local folklore practitioners. By exploring the thematic structures and cultural meanings of these songs, this study contributes to the preservation of Terengganu's

intangible heritage and to deepening the understanding of Malay oral literature as a living cultural legacy.

Problem Statement

Folk tales are slowly disappearing from public view as modernised narratives such as Moana, Cinderella, and Frozen increasingly captivate the younger generation (Fazurawati, 2017). The rapid expansion of the global film industry has also contributed to the marginalisation of traditional folk narratives, particularly those expressed through songs. Younger audiences now favour contemporary films and television dramas over classical tales (Zaidi, 2021). Consequently, modern youth possess limited knowledge of Malaysia's rich oral traditions, which are priceless cultural treasures that form a core component of the nation's identity. The weakening of cultural identity and the lack of emphasis on traditional arts and heritage education further exacerbate this decline, thereby restricting the continuity of oral traditions central to Malaysia's collective memory.

Moreover, the diminishing practice of the literary arts is closely linked to the disappearance of the *penglipur lara*, or the traditional storyteller, who once served as the custodian of Malay folklore and folk music (Aida, 2020). The *penglipur lara* not only performed folk songs and oral narratives but also served as a moral guide and cultural educator within the community. Their extinction has weakened the social fabric of Malay society, particularly among youth, resulting in the loss of identity, manners, and artistic appreciation. As the last known successor to this legacy, Awang Batil emphasised that becoming a *penglipur lara* requires deep emotional attachment to culture and mastery of traditional instruments such as the biola (violin) and serunai (oboe-like instrument), a skill cultivated over many years (Bernama, 2021).

Motivated by these challenges, this study seeks to address the urgent need to document, analyse, and preserve the folk narratives embedded in Terengganu's traditional songs before they vanish entirely. By exploring the thematic richness and cultural meanings of these songs, this research contributes to sustaining Malaysia's intangible cultural heritage and revitalising public interest in Malay oral traditions.

Methodology

This study used qualitative research. The ethnographic fieldwork was performed in Kuala Terengganu. Data collection was conducted with eight selected informants. Informants were chosen for their relatively high English proficiency, ensuring that the collected data would be credible and trustworthy. One of the song composers was regarded as the primary informant for the study, as he had extensive experience with traditional folk songs.

The researcher knew what data needed and therefore used relevant methods, such as participant observation and semi-structured interviews. Participant observation provided the most critical information and was essential to any primary research activity. The researcher gained priceless insights into the folk songs through participation in several activities with the study participants. This enabled the researcher to meticulously record relevant details that would help answer the research questions.

The data from the interviews, participant observations, and supplementary documentaries were analysed using NVivo Plus software. The analysis included transcribing, organising, becoming familiar with the data, coding, developing themes, and checking the findings for credibility and reliability. The output was presented in a detailed report that described the folk tales present in the traditional songs of Terengganu.

Table 1

Profile of Informants

| No. | Informant ID | Category | Gender | Age | Occupation |
|-----|--------------|---------------------|--------|-----|--------------------------------------|
| 1. | IRU 1 | Song Composer | Male | 71 | Government Pensioner |
| 2. | IRU 2 | Lyricist | Male | 85 | Government Pensioner |
| 3. | IRU 3 | Cultural Artist | Male | 51 | Officer Department Culture (JKKN) |
| 4. | IRU 4 | Song Composer | Male | 36 | Director of PKW UniSZA |
| 5. | IRU 5 | Folk Song Singer | Female | 79 | Government Pensioner |
| 6. | IR 6 | Local Resident | Female | 30 | Factory Worker |
| 7. | IR 7 | Local Resident | Male | 26 | Student |
| 8. | IR 8 | Local Resident | Female | 25 | Student |

(Source: Fieldwork data, 2025)



Figure 1. Interview session with the Primary Informant

(Source: Fieldwork, 2024)

Findings and Discussion

These results bring to light the folk stories woven into the traditional folk songs of Terengganu. Needful explanations help reveal the narratives strung through folk songs, most of which possess both surface and concealed meanings, often mistaken for simple interpretations that require more understanding from the composer, especially in dialectal composition pieces.

This chapter further targets the study's second objective by analysing the narrative structure of selected folk songs from Terengganu. The discourse includes folk tales contained in songs, such as *Ulek Mayang*, *Watimang Landok*, *Itik Gembo-Gembo*, *Pintal Tali*, *Patendu Patende*, and *Anok Udang*.

Ulek Mayang

Ulek Mayang is one of the most iconic traditional performances in Malaysia, renowned for its musical and dance elements often associated with mysticism and spiritual beliefs. The origins of *Ulek Mayang* can be traced to the fishing and agrarian communities of Terengganu, where it was initially performed not as a dance but as a ritualistic folk practice, typically held on nights of the full moon. The primary function of the performance was to "revive the mayang," referring to a ceremonial object made from coconut palm blossom believed to possess spiritual significance. Participants would gather in a circular formation, passing the mayang from one to another while chanting specific verses. The recitation of these verses was believed to animate the mayang, imbuing it with spiritual force.

Notably, the performance often involved altered states of consciousness, with individuals reportedly falling into trances or losing awareness. In such instances, traditional healers (*bomoh*) were called upon to conduct ritual healing as part of the performance. This reflects the syncretic nature of *Ulek Mayang*, where entertainment, ritual, and indigenous spiritual beliefs converge. As such, *Ulek Mayang* represents a unique form of intangible cultural heritage that encapsulates the Malay community in Terengganu's cosmological worldview and healing traditions.

"Ulek mayang ini adalah pemujaan atau perbomohan untuk mengubat orang sakit"

(IRU1)

Following the rediscovery of *Ulek Mayang*, the dance element was formalised and choreographed by Abdul Aziz Sulaiman and Mazlan Embong in 1971 during their involvement with the Darul Ehsan Youth Association. This development contributed significantly to the popularisation of *Ulek Mayang* among the Terengganu community. The song was further refined, and a structured choreography was developed, incorporating symbolic gestures that reflected the worldview of traditional healers (*bomoh*) and the mythological presence of seven celestial princesses.

According to Informant IRU 1, the dance movements were designed to narrate a coherent storyline, transforming the performance into a visual enactment of a sacred ritual. Traditionally, *Ulek Mayang* was performed as an offering to appease the spirits of the sea and to ensure the safety of those venturing out to sea, particularly fishermen.

The musical ensemble accompanying the performance typically includes traditional instruments such as the *gendang ibu* (mother drum), *gendang anak* (child drum), *gong*, and *serunai* (a type of Malay oboe). In regions where the *serunai* was unavailable, it was commonly substituted with a *seruling* (flute), ensuring the continuity of the performance using locally accessible instruments. This evolution from ritual to performance illustrates the adaptive nature of oral and performative traditions, which maintain cultural relevance while preserving spiritual symbolism and community identity.

“Lagu Ulek Mayang ini telah diolah balik buat tarian”

(IRU1)



Figure 2: Ulek Mayang Performance

(Source: State Department of Arts and Culture, 2018)

A popular folk narrative associated with *Ulek Mayang* tells the story of a fisherman who, while at sea, loses consciousness and collapses. He is subsequently brought back to shore, where a *bomoh* (traditional healer) is summoned to perform a healing ritual. During the ritual, it is believed that the fisherman becomes possessed by seven celestial princesses, who manifest before him in a spiritual vision.

Initially, the performance would include all seven princesses; however, to accommodate time constraints and maintain audience engagement, the representation was shortened to focus on four—namely, the second, fourth, sixth, and seventh. These selected figures still symbolically embody the mystical and hierarchical nature of the original legend, ensuring the essence of the myth is preserved within the contemporary performance.

*“Puteri dua berbaju serong,
Puteri dua bersanggol sendeng,
Puteri dua bersubang gading,
Puteri dua berselendang kuning,
Umbok umbok dengan jala jemala (mayang diumbok),*

Nak ulek mayang diulek.”

(IRU 1)

“Tujuan kita pendekkan lirik tu, semata-mata kita ada had masa bagi satu satu tarian. Kalau ikut yang original version mantera bomoh tu, menyeru sorang demi sorang, tarian tu akan jadi panjang.”

(IRU 5)

According to Informant IRU1, performing *Ulek Mayang* in contemporary Terengganu has become increasingly challenging due to religious constraints. This is primarily because the performance has been classified as *khurafat* (superstitious or un-Islamic practice) by the state religious authorities, in line with existing *fatwa* (Islamic legal rulings). As a result, public presentations of *Ulek Mayang* are subject to scrutiny, and its performance is often restricted or avoided in certain official or religiously sensitive contexts.

“Tapi diluar Terengganu kita buat je, padahal untuk persembahan sekarang kita takde pun nak memuja sekadar persembahan semata mata”

(IRU1)



Figure 3: Male Dancer Performing Ulek Mayang

(Source: State Department of Arts and Culture, 2018)

Although *Ulek Mayang* is often associated with mystical phenomena, there have been recorded instances of hysteria affecting both performers and audience members during its presentation. For example, in 2018, a cultural dance troupe performed *Ulek Mayang* at Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA) as part of a promotional event for Visit Terengganu Year. During the performance, one of the dancers reportedly became possessed on stage, instilling fear and unease among the spectators and reinforcing public perception of the song's mystical nature.

However, according to IRU 5, a former *Ulek Mayang* dancer, such incidents are more likely attributed to psychological susceptibility or suggestive thinking. IRU 5 emphasised that individuals who experience hysteria during the performance are often those with weak

emotional resilience or preconceived notions that the performance is inherently supernatural or frightening.

“Bila sorang dah kena kang, doh mule tepik, mulalah ye berjangkit lah, kang. Lagi satu mami rasa budak budak baru ni (penari Ulek Mayang baru), dia terlalu excited dapat menari Ulek Mayang ni”

(IRU 5)

According to IRU 5, the distinctive nature of *Ulek Mayang* as a memorable performance that particularly in terms of its elaborate costumes and ceremonial aura, may lead new or inexperienced dancers to become overly excited or emotionally overwhelmed, which can in turn trigger psychosomatic reactions such as hysteria. She noted that this heightened emotional state, rather than any actual mystical influence, is often the root cause of such episodes. IRU 5 further stated that during her time as a *Ulek Mayang* performer, she never experienced hysteria or possession, reinforcing the view that such occurrences are not inherent to the performance itself, but rather stem from individual psychological disposition and perception.



Figure 4. Illustration of IRU 5 Performing Ulek Mayang
(Source: Fieldwork Findings, 2024)

Ulek Mayang possesses significant cultural value to the extent that it has been recognised as an official traditional heritage of the state of Terengganu. However, among the younger generation, there has been a noticeable shift in perception, with many influenced by negative portrayals that frame the song as eerie or frightening, leading to its avoidance in contemporary performance settings. This misperception has contributed to the gradual detachment of youth from appreciating the ritualistic and artistic richness embedded in *Ulek Mayang*.

Ulek Badang

According to IRU 2, the inspiration for composing the song *Ulek Badang* emerged while he was in his hometown in Terengganu. At the time, the village was surrounded by many swamplands, and it was common to see villagers diligently engaged in the traditional

activity of paddy winnowing within these wetlands. He observed that, as the villagers crossed the paddy boundaries, groups of five to six individuals would carry *badang padi* or *tampi padi*, traditional rice winnowing tools. It was this everyday rural scene, reflecting the communal labour and cultural rhythm of village life, that sparked his creative impulse to compose a song inspired by what he witnessed. The observation of movement, repetition, and the harmony of rural work became the foundation for translating an agricultural routine into a cultural performance.

*“Ulik ulik badang,
Mari ulik dalam bendang,
Sama-sama mengulik,
Mari ulik dalam bendang.*

*Ulik ulik badang
Mari ulik kawan-kawan
Sama-sama mengulik
Lepaskan lengoh di badan
Pabila masak padi dituai
Mari menuai beramai-ramai*

*Ulik ulik badang
Badang buluh buluh berang
Sama-sama mengighek
Ighek padi tengah bendang.”*

(IRU 2)

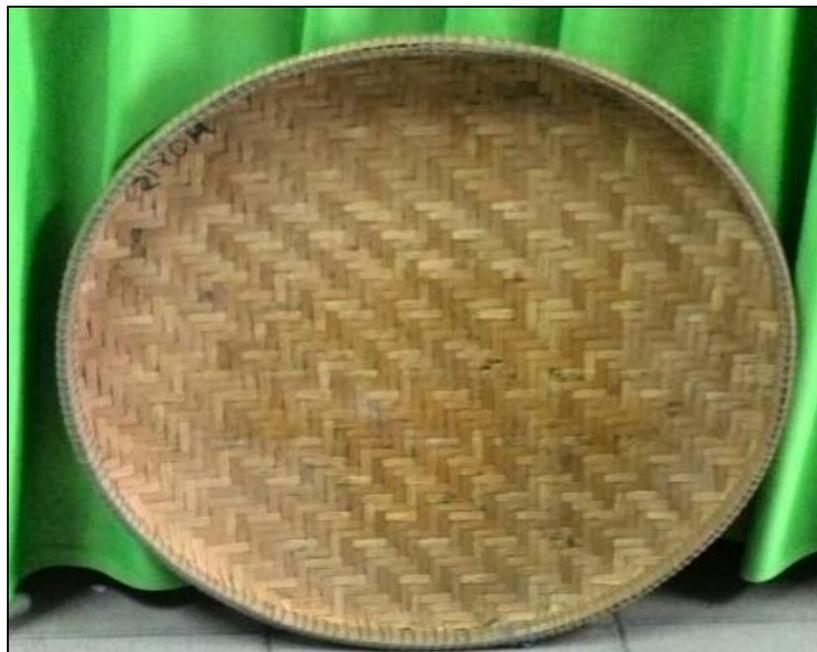


Figure 5. Badang Padi
(Source: Field Study,2024)

IRU 2 also stated that after drawing inspiration from the farmers, he composed the tune and melody for the song *Ulek Badang*. Following this, he consulted choreographers Wan Latiff and Aziz Sulaiman to develop the accompanying dance movements. According to him, every folk song inherently possesses its own unique choreography that enhances its appeal and serves as a medium for cultural promotion.

The dance sequences were choreographed to the musical arrangement provided to the choreographers, ensuring that the bodily movements harmonised with the song's rhythm and structure. This collaboration between composer and choreographer reflects the integrated nature of traditional folk performance, in which music and movement are inseparable elements in the transmission of cultural meaning.



Figure 6. Ulek Badang Dance Performance
(Source: State Department of Arts and Culture, 2017)

According to IRU 2, the choreography of *Ulek Badang* required the incorporation of a distinct narrative structure. As such, a storyline was developed around the ritualistic act of local farmers invoking the spirit of the paddy, symbolising their hopes for a bountiful harvest. This narrative context is rooted in the historical importance of agriculture as the primary source of livelihood in Terengganu during that period.

The dance performance of *Ulek Badang* integrates various traditional farming tools as props, including paddy planters' hats, hoes, and sickles. These tools are not only symbolic of the agrarian lifestyle but also serve as visual representations of the community's cultural and economic practices. The use of such elements underscores the intimate relationship between the performance and the region's agricultural heritage.

Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that the folk tales embedded within Terengganu's traditional songs are rich in values, moral lessons, and historical significance. Each composition carries layers of literal and metaphorical meaning, reflecting the collective

memories, worldviews, and identities of the local community. Beyond their artistic function, these songs serve as vessels of oral tradition, preserving beliefs, wisdom, and social norms transmitted across generations.

The presence of active composers and cultural practitioners who continue to revive these traditions presents valuable opportunities for artistic research, heritage education, and digital preservation. Their efforts enable the reinterpretation and documentation of lesser-known narratives, providing educational and tourism potential while reinforcing cultural continuity amid technological change. Through ethnographic analysis, this study examined key folk songs such as *Ulek Mayang*, *Watimang Landok*, *Ulek Badang*, and *Rodat*, identifying dominant themes including folk mysticism and ritual healing, love and longing, agrotechnology, and Islamic spirituality. These findings reveal the multidimensional role of folk songs in cultivating moral awareness, community values, and spiritual consciousness.

Motivated by the decline of traditional song appreciation in modern society, this research contributes to the preservation and revitalisation of Malay oral heritage by offering a comprehensive thematic interpretation of Terengganu's folk songs. The selection of Terengganu as the focal point of the study was crucial, given its prominence as a cultural heartland with a rich storytelling tradition and a population deeply familiar with its musical heritage. Ultimately, this study reaffirms the centrality of oral literature in understanding Malay identity and cultural resilience. Its key contribution lies in demonstrating how folk songs function as living repositories of knowledge, moral instruction, and communal memory, underscoring their relevance in contemporary education, national identity formation, and heritage policy. It is hoped that the findings will inspire future initiatives among educators, policymakers, and cultural practitioners to integrate folk traditions into the pedagogy of artistic appreciation and identity building.

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