

Review

Rhythms of Kinabalu 2022 “Coming Back Stronger”: A Review

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ABSTRACT

This article reviews the Rhythms of Kinabalu 2022 from the dual perspective of management and performance. Ever since its commencement in 2011, Rhythms of Kinabalu has been a yearly large-scale event organised by the National Department for Culture and Arts under the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture Malaysia along with other collaborative bodies. The aim of this festival is to showcase the diversity and uniqueness of the dances, arts, and music in Sabah for the purpose of their continued popularity, relevance, and sustainability. As such, the review examines the current nature of festival, paying attention to the various categories of performances and performers in Rhythms of Kinabalu 2022 as well as the favoured and less favoured performances and/or artists as indicated by viewer turnouts of the live shows. At the same time, the article seeks to understand the local audiences' reception and/or reaction towards the event and its many shows to signal the current festivalgoers' taste and preference of the performing arts. A main observation reveals the striking presence of the art of busking and an imbalance in the representation of modern and traditional art forms. Essentially, the representation of traditional arts was limited and those artists struggled to keep up with their more modern counterpart. Technology, namely, social media, has been identified to have played a major role in influencing this outcome and contributing to this scenario. Management wise, the lack of cooperation from business entities (i.e., premise operators and owners) in support of the local artists, performers, small and medium enterprises, and the event itself is a cause for concern as this has caused several setbacks which were detrimental to the festival's operations. Hence, the art-based and managerial issues identified in this review may benefit the relevant stakeholders in its decision-making of the festival's future cycles.

Keywords: *rhythms, Kinabalu, Sabah, performance, management*

Rhythms of Kinabalu is a Mysenicultural Programme organised by the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture Malaysia, and managed by the State Department of Culture and Arts, Sabah. The programme was commenced in 2011, each time featuring numerous modern and traditional music as well as performances by Sabahan artists, composers, and performance groups. It showcases the diversity and uniqueness of the dance art and music in Sabah to all audiences of various backgrounds. Among the objectives of Rhythms of Kinabalu include the promotion and preservation of the dance and music of Sabah and the expansion of people's appreciation and interest towards the artistic activities in Sabah. This aim extends to the goal of driving the creative industry sector as well as tourism, aside from showcasing and discovering local talent. In 2021, the programme took on a different approach as it was digitally implemented with a new concept as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the more recent Rhythms of Kinabalu 2022 “Coming Back Stronger” reverted to its original form. A collaborative effort between the Rhythm of Kualintangan Beaufort Sabah Club and the National Department

for Culture and Arts Sabah, among others, Rhythms of Kinabalu 2022 was held from 28 until 30 October 2022 at Lintasan Deasoka Kota Kinabalu and other surrounding areas. The event saw the participation of 32 musical groups, seven dance troupes and a number of local artists. It was officiated by Yang Berhormat Datuk Joniston Bangkuai, Sabah Assistant Minister of Tourism, Culture and Environment representing His Excellency the Chief Minister of Sabah.

All local performers, participants of the programme totalled to 400 and were mainly represented by the “other” races in Malaysia aside from Malays and a highly limited number of Chinese performers. Indians, meanwhile, recorded no participation at all. In terms of performance category or style, the latest Rhythms of Kinabalu was dominated by busking groups such as Zher Buskers, Retro Buskers, Ray Buskers, Seniman Buskers, Bjak Buskers, and many others. Musical troupes in the 2022 event included D’Step, Tagap, Pratama Legacy, while local artists were personalities such as Elica Paujin, Francis Landong, and Abu Bakar Allah. Among these acts, several emerged especially popular among the attendees. These include Masmona Buskers, Elica Paujin, Suara Buluh Perindu Buskers, and Persatuan Seni Budaya Tuaran (PESTA) Buskers. Masmona Buskers is a well-known and established performance group on YouTube. The group has a steady following of fans and followers due to its content uploads, showcasing the members’ busking performances in the channel. The group gained further fame and recognition as a result of its Sabah Ginawoku clip that highlighted features of Sabah. Masmona Buskers is also known for their cover of “Seperti Mati Lampu” originally sang by Indonesian artist Nassar. Since this busking group is already active online and readily known, it was therefore one of the awaited performances by the event’s attendees. Meanwhile, another artist whose performance was especially looked forward to was Elica Paujin. A young and talented singer hailing from Tambunan, Sabah, Elica emerged as the winner of *Mentor Milenia* and victor of *Big Stage 2022*. The artist performed a strong rendition of the song “Momohubo” and as expected, her vocals enchanted the masses. Also attracting the attention and interest of the audience members were the Suara Buluh Perindu Buskers. This group of local talents made use of bamboos as musical highlights in their performance. Aside from their attractive and powerful vocals, another identifying niche of the group was their ability to perform both traditional and modern songs from bamboos.

However, it is unfortunate to note that some acts did not receive the same level of admiration, interest, fame, and attention as to the other more popular ones. This is apparent by the audience members’ reaction, or lack of thereof, towards the affected performances. A deeper review into the matter reveals the nature of arts which was less appealing to the attendees. Among those arts which were unsuccessful in gaining a healthy number of viewership were those of traditional art forms. In many cases, the form of performance of these acts take on a more laid-back, gentler approach which diminishes the appeal of loud, forceful music. In addition to that, less popular acts that have yet to gain a sustainable media following also received lesser attention and viewership. This shows that the digitalisation of arts and online artistic platforms have a really significant effect on audience members’ viewing activity and interest which extends to the artists’ appeal in live performances. Acts which have received widespread exposure in terms of viewership and shares on social media and broadcasting services receive the same level of attention in live shows as they do online, while the contrary is true for those which do not. Hence, digital promotion and presence have a positive impact on the performers’ face-to-face or physical engagement with their fans and viewers. Audience engagement was also observed to be a defining feature of the programme. In most cases, these caused the live acts to go over the set time limit, which was largely forgiven due to the huge and favourable response from the public.

Furthermore, it is apparent in the programme that older generation of performers struggle to keep up with the level and norm of younger artists as well as the needs and desires of the current audience. One of the reasons is, again, the lack of their presence in the digital world, a current trend that is hard to ignore and overcome by older artists. The factor of their dwindling popularity and impact is further contributed by their lessening influence within the local artistic scene as a result of declining artistic activity and art productions such as new music. This present scenario indicates, among others, that traditional arts which were the defining feature of the culture, art and community of Sabah continues to struggle with the advancement of technology and development. If such continues to be the true of the event, this therefore heavily implies that the programme’s objective is left biased and unbalanced for the larger two forms of arts in Sabah—the modern performance and the traditional art. As such, greater attention and efforts are needed for the management to offer and guarantee a more or less similar level of exposure generation for both modern and traditional artists or performers. In lieu of this matter, traditional artists, especially, would require enhanced assistance and blueprint for its continued significance, influence, and presence among the present generation of audience and the industry as a whole. This extends to the application of digital technology and the virtual environment, which has a faster and vaster appeal to the current group of art viewers and attendees.

A further analysis into the previous and latest Rhythms of Kinabalu programme revealed the matter of artist or performer retainment and continued interest in the event. As Rhythms of Kinabalu 2022 was dominated by busking groups, Rhythms of Kinabalu 2021 was slightly different as it saw the participation of musicians from all parts of Sabah including the Northwest Coast Division, West Coast Division, Upper Inland Division, Lower Inland Division, Sandakan Division, and the East Coast Division of Sabah. Rhythms of Kinabalu 2021 largely concentrated on musical viewings, ranging from singing, modern and traditional musical repertoire, as well as dance and storytelling. In the 2022 lineup, certain artists or groups were recurring headliners, and they were those such as D'Step, Pratama, and Tagap. The dominance of buskers in Rhythms of Kinabalu 2022 signals the current artistic taste of the masses and the arts community in Sabah alike. Supposedly, their prominence in the scene is due to their ability to creatively entertain in the new norm and their niftiness in taking advantage of digital platforms for artistic-related activities and purposes. Their effort proves to be true and worthwhile since they were among the most awaited acts to headline the programme. In this era, technological savviness is a factor that cannot be ignored among performers who wish to develop a large following and greater presence in the arts scene.

Albeit a success, in its relative sense and as far as management is concerned, several other emerging issues were also detrimental to the project. Among others, location and venue served as problems. The performers were subject to outdoor shows as premise owners declined indoor performances to be staged, citing several concerns such as safety and resource availability. As a result, performers were allowed minimal space to perform and were forced to deal with other external conditions such as the weather and access to the venue. Whereas there were only minor hiccups in the technical preparation of the performances as enough rehearsal sessions were afforded, the live shows proved to be a cause of anxiety for the management and performers alike due to its outdoor location. The concern over weather was justified with the heavy rain during the second day of the event that unfortunately resulted in some unfairly cancelled performances. This also impacted management which had to resort to additional resource provisions and allocations such as umbrella and raincoats, therefore adding to the budgeting and expenditure. Also, the relatively small area of the main stage and the unexpected audience turnout which was larger than projected were other barriers for the management and artists. Performers find it difficult to reach the stage as the site was jam packed with viewers and attendees. Thus, mobility was negatively affected, and a greater impact saw the closures of main roads and severe traffic congestions around the location and perimeters of the venues, which hindered a smooth transportation service. Audience research of the festival found a total of 35,000 attendees with "other" races documenting the largest group of festivalgoers, and this was larger than the originally expected turnout. This was followed by the Chinese, Malays, and Indians. In general, the attendees were made up of adults and youths, with the majority being the local population. The demography of the attendees is unsurprising and rather expected due to the nature of the programme as well as the local population itself. It is also apparent that premise operators and the business community's cooperation, while much needed and welcomed, is a continued concern for a programme such as this. An underlying factor may be related to the economic advantage of the programme to the business premise or organisation, and the fact that businesses rarely see the potential of the arts community as a beneficial collaborative input in their business activity. Such is ironic given that the programme consisted side businesses for entrepreneurial-oriented purposes. Hence, a better two-way collaboration is needed between the arts community and/or organisation and the business industry.

Undoubtedly, Rhythms of Kinabalu affects the community and creative industry both socially and financially. As part of its social impact, this programme has given space and opportunity to the audience and/or attendees to cultivate interest in Sabahan culture and arts, while at the same time supporting the revival of these elements or features in Sabah. This further serves as encouragement and support to local artists to continue to create and help fuel the art and local culture. The showmanship of old and newer performers enhanced viewers' knowledge of the performance arts, and these deeper insights enhanced their understanding and view towards the performers. Among the performers themselves, opportunities for collaboration and the formation of newer groups were made possible. Hence, a greater migration between performance groups that are active within Kota Kinabalu and those that operate beyond Kota Kinabalu is observed. However, a further analysis in terms of its financial or economic aspect reveals that although income generation was made possible for local cultural arts entrepreneurs through performances, cultural art bazaars, and demonstrations of various local products, this income and profit generation is left unbalanced among performers and/or musicians and business-oriented entities. Among art entrepreneurs themselves, there was a large disparity between profiting and non-profiting acts and their return of investment (ROI) income with the very least was reporting RM 100.00 in profit, which does not project a healthy sum. Among the performers and musicians, there is an average generation of revenues

within hundreds to thousands of ringgit. Meanwhile, businesses made the most profit reaching to hundreds of thousands of Malaysian Ringgit.

Nevertheless, with limited research into the Rhythms of Sabah programme, a review such as this may be limited to its overall outlook. To further determine its actual potential and identify emerging issues, the programme managers and other related stakeholders should conduct more in-depths empirical analysis into the event's influence and impact for the programme's future development and expansion. This is because the presence of the programme may be felt among the communities in Sabah, but the extent in which the same is true for Peninsula Malaysia remains to be seen until proven. This approach to inquiry and justification is not farfetched, since many critics and observers are inclined towards research in practice in the arts. Festival reviews are common, and this activity receives further support from practical research. For example, the event organiser may perform survey analysis to elicit the feedback of different groups of communities that are involved in the programme, such as artists and performers, attendees or audience members, collaborators, and the management team itself.

In conclusion, this review has discussed the programme Rhythms of Kinabalu from the performance and managerial perspectives. This review has forwarded several points of consideration for the relevant parties in the development and handling of the programme, which should benefit future endeavours into its growth and other similar festivals. The current appeal of busking as opposed to other forms of arts in Sabah suggests a greater inclination towards modern art and performance in the needs analysis of audience members within the local community. However, such is not conclusive as busking as an art form does combine the elements of old music and traditional instruments. Hence, a greater analysis into this art form will prove to be beneficial in determining its exact appeal to the masses. While this identification of the more popular art forms and acts may be a major variable influencing future events, event organisers of the Rhythms of Sabah should bear in mind its objective in artistic and cultural sustainability of traditional arts in Sabah as well. Thus, a framework detailing a balanced approach towards modern and traditional artists and performers may be necessary. The same goes in terms of the participation of musical, dance, and other categories of performers. Aside from that, the management of Rhythms of Kinabalu may wish to enhance its application of both physical live shows and online platforms in order to gain a greater reach of audience members and exposure to the shows. This will allow the programme to branch out of Sabah to include viewership from other states and nationalities. Another effort is to build international linkages and collaborations to garner further reach and exposure towards the event to outsiders and the international audience. Additionally, a more successful and beneficial collaboration between business premise owners and the arts organisation is another necessity. The arts and business relationship may be improved from the identification of a win-win situation for both parties, and it is up to the arts managers and artists to make this point clear. A further point of consideration is the need for actual or practical research into the programme as a whole, particularly since it has been run for over more than 10 years and its impact rarely documented in arts-based academia and writing. In essence, Rhythms of Kinabalu continues to be an ongoing effort to assist artists in music, dance, and others to work on invigorating art and culture in the State of Sabah while at the same time supporting their activities financially, whether directly or indirectly. With the tagline "Coming Back Stronger," Rhythms of Kinabalu 2022 was geared towards the reinvention of the creative industry post-COVID-19, and this aim was altogether achieved.



Figure 1 Main stage banner
 Source: JKKK Sabah photo collection.



Figure 2 Main banner.
 Source: JKKK Sabah photo collection.

Rhythms of Kinabalu 2022
#comingbackstronger
28-30 OKTOBER 2022
8.00 PAGI - 11.00 MALAM
LINTASAN DEASOKA, KOTA KINABALU

STATION A
PERSEMBAHAN POKET
28 OKTOBER

- 3.00PM - 7.00PM ➤ BUSKERS - KAZEN BUSKERS
STREET DANCE - ARTUMS UMS
- 7.00PM - 11.00PM ➤ BUSKERS - RETRO BUSKERS
STREET DANCE - ARTUMS UMS
- 3.00PM - 11.00PM ➤ HUMAN STATUE
PELUKIS KARIKATOR
COSPLAY KOSTUM ADIWIRA

29 OKTOBER

- 9.00AM - 2.00PM ➤ BUSKERS - WANO FEAT WAN "G"
STREET DANCE - PRATAMA LEGACY
- 2.00PM - 6.00PM ➤ BUSKERS - SENIMAN BUSKERS
STREET DANCE - PRATAMA LEGACY
- 6.00PM - 11.00PM ➤ BUSKERS - TANAK RANAHOON BUSKERS
STREET DANCE - PRATAMA LEGACY
- 9.00AM - 11.00PM ➤ HUMAN STATUE
PELUKIS KARIKATOR
COSPLAY KOSTUM ADIWIRA

30 OKTOBER

- 8.00AM - 2.00PM ➤ BUSKERS - B JAK BUSKERS
STREET DANCE - D'STEP
- 8.00AM - 2.00PM ➤ HUMAN STATUE
PELUKIS KARIKATOR
COSPLAY KOSTUM ADIWIRA

Figure 3 Station A banner.
Source: JKKK Sabah photo collection.

Rhythms of Kinabalu 2022
#comingbackstronger
28-30 OKTOBER 2022
8.00 PAGI - 11.00 MALAM
LINTASAN DEASOKA, KOTA KINABALU

STATION B
PERSEMBAHAN POKET
28 OKTOBER

- 3.00PM - 7.00PM ➤ BUSKERS - RAY BUSKERS
STREET DANCE - D'STEP
- 7.00PM - 11.00PM ➤ BUSKERS - AMPAL BUSKERS
STREET DANCE - D'STEP
- 3.00PM - 11.00PM ➤ HUMAN STATUE
PELUKIS KARIKATOR
COSPLAY KOSTUM ADIWIRA

29 OKTOBER

- 9.00AM - 3.00PM ➤ BUSKERS - G BROTHERS
STREET DANCE - TAGAP
- 3.00PM - 6.00PM ➤ BUSKERS - JEMBANGAN BUSKERS
STREET DANCE - TAGAP
- 6.00PM - 11.00PM ➤ BUSKERS - DD CLAN
STREET DANCE - TAGAP
- 9.00AM - 11.00PM ➤ HUMAN STATUE
PELUKIS KARIKATOR
COSPLAY KOSTUM ADIWIRA

30 OKTOBER

- 8.00AM - 11.00PM ➤ BUSKERS - RYAN FEAT APAI DUO
STREET DANCE - TAGAP
- 8.00AM - 2.00PM ➤ HUMAN STATUE
PELUKIS KARIKATOR
COSPLAY KOSTUM ADIWIRA

Figure 4 Station B banner.
Source: JKKK Sabah photo collection.



Figure 5 Extravaganza Gala Night Rhythms of Kinabalu 2022 main poster.
Source: JKKK Sabah photo collection.

KEMENTERIAN PELANCONGAN, SEMI DAN BUDAYA MALAYSIA
BADAN KEKESIHATAN DAN KESENIAN NEGARA

R.O.K.B.S.C

Rhythms of Kinabalu 2022
#comingbackstronger

PENCUNGKILAN BAKAT
ROK GOT THE TALENT
29 OKTOBER 2022
8.00 PAGI - 12.00 TENGAHARI
PENTAS UTAMA
LINTASAN DEASOKA, KOTA KINABALU

Syarat Penyertaan

1. Warganegara Malaysia yang berumur 16 Tahun keatas
2. Terbuka untuk semua kategori bakat seperti:
| Nyanyian | Tarian | Lawak | Puisi | Lakonan |
| Akrobatik | Silap Mata | Aksi Ekstrim |
3. Peserta perlu membawa kelengkapan sendiri seperti Lagu Minus One dan Lain-Lain Kelengkapan yang diperlukan
4. Persembahan yang mempunyai unsur-unsur provokatif dan lucah adalah **Tidak Dibenarkan**.
5. Masa yang diberikan untuk persembahan adalah: **3 MINIT SAHAJA**
6. Keselamatan peserta semasa persembahan adalah **Tanggungjawab Peserta**.
7. Keputusan pengadil adalah **Muktamad**.
8. Yuran penyertaan adalah sebanyak **RM10 SAHAJA**

Sebarang **Pertanyaan dan Pendaftaran:**
 **011-1638 6991 - Mr.Pid Azlin**

Logos: JKKK, TOURISM MALAYSIA, ROK B.S.C, R.O.K.B.S.C, SESB, ASTIF, and others.

Figure 6 ROK Got The Talent Competition main poster.

Source: JKKK Sabah photo collection.



Figure 7 Rhythms of Kinabalu 2022 main poster.

Source: JKKN Sabah photo collection.



Figure 8 Full event schedule.
Source: JKKN Sabah photo collection.



Figure 9 Street music performance activities from buskers music group and Royal Malaysian Navy Kota Kinabalu.
Source: JKKN Sabah photo collection.



Figure 10 Singing, dancing and music performances from the Sabah and Sarawak state buskers music group in conjunction with the Rhythms of Kinabalu “Coming Back Stronger” concert night. Performances involve veteran artists, youth, teenagers and children.

Source: JKKN Sabah photo collection.



Figure 11 Spectators who have flooded Lintasan Deasoka, Kota Kinabalu to witness the Rhythms of Kinabalu 2022 concert.

Source: JKKN Sabah photo collection.

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