

Cosmopolitanism in the Malay Popular Music of the Gramophone Era in British Malaya

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The British inculcated ‘an Anglicized vision of the Malayan in the minds of the locals’ through education, propaganda, radio, censorship and culture in the colonial era (Tim Harper 2001). Nevertheless, colonial construction of the Anglophone Malayan provoked challenges from the various communities including performers and musicians particularly in the 1930s till Independence in 1957. They debated their own visions of nationalism and decolonization through newspapers, popular culture and organizations that they had set up.

This paper addresses the different ways in which Bangsawan or Malay opera musicians in Malaya appropriated western technology, media and music; and reworked genres, texts and languages to create their own popular Malay music that was modern and cosmopolitan. Yet this new popular music was different from Anglo-American pop. The musicians were performing their own type of local cosmopolitanism, which they experienced as they travelled around and lived in the urban colonial port cities. This local cosmopolitanism was open to the transnational exchange of culture, crossing boundaries of class and ethnicity. It was characterized by what Appiah (1997, 2006) defines as ‘universality plus difference,’ in which people from different locations and faiths interact with mutual consideration. This form of ‘vernacular cosmopolitanism’ was based on cultural difference, multiculturalism, self-advancement and a sense of connection with all humanity through values (Appadurai 2011).

In effect, to use Ben Anderson's term (2012), this mode of colonial cosmopolitanism was 'rooted'. The musicians did not travel outside of the Malay world but were exposed to and absorbed universal ideas about change that circulated in the region. They used Malay, the local lingua franca, which had no fixed form, and mixed it with other languages to spread their messages. They interacted with Indian, Chinese, Arab and other diasporic people at the port cities where they performed, and mixed Anglo-American music with their own to speak to and attract audiences that were not limited to any one community or nation. This 'rooted cosmopolitanism' was a type of nationalist discourse that differed from the mainstream Malay nationalist narrative which Milner (1995) describes as 'invented', which began to essentialize the meaning of *Melayu* (Malayness), connecting it to a fixed terrain and race (*bangsa*).

The new popular music that was hybrid and had texts about progress was a means to imagine and disseminate ideas about decolonization and to challenge European colonial construction of the Anglophone prior to Independence. However, the notion of difference was not simply a set of binary oppositions such as colonizer and colonized, western and indigenous, or hegemony and resistance; it was complicated.

Urban Entertainment: Malay opera, Gramophone and Amusement Parks

Malay popular music developed in tandem with socio-political transformations resulting from British colonialism in the early twentieth century. Rapid economic development attracted Chinese, Indian and Indonesian immigrants who provided labour for the tin mines, rubber estates and the construction of roads and railways. By the 1920s and 1930s, port cities and towns had been created and an urban multi-ethnic

population had emerged. Diverse Malay-speaking Muslims who worked as merchants, traders, religious teachers, journalists and artisans inhabited the colonial cities.¹ These Malays travelled throughout the region and recognized themselves as part of a greater Malay world which they referred to as Malaya Raya, Indonesia, Malaya or Nusantara (Archipelago). They interacted with other Malays and non-Muslim immigrants using the Malay language as a lingua franca, and formed an emerging cosmopolitan urban middle class (Kahn 2006:174-5).

A variety of non-indigenous cultural activities and commercial theatre (such as European and American operetta, revue and vaudeville, Chinese opera and Parsi theatre) toured the main port cities and bigger towns providing entertainment for the multi-ethnic urban population. Local commercial operatic genres, such as *bangsawan* or Malay opera, also developed in the urban areas. The *bangsawan* performers staged stories from different parts of the Malay Archipelago as well as from the Chinese, Arabic and Indian classics. They created and disseminated popular songs throughout the region as the troupes travelled from island to island to perform (see Tan 1993).

At the same time, new forms of media such as the gramophone, radio and film entertained multiethnic audiences from different social and class backgrounds. Music from the Malay opera or *bangsawan* became the basis of popular music, which was recorded by gramophone companies, played on the radio and used in Malay films in the first half of the twentieth century. Recording companies active in the pre-World War II British

¹ The Malay-speaking Muslims included the ‘Minangkabau, Mandailing, Kerinci, Acehese from Sumatra; different groups from the Riau archipelago, Java and Madura; Bugis from the Celebes, Banjar from Borneo; “pure” Malays from the port cities and estuarine towns of British Malaya, Sumatra and Borneo; Kelantanese and people from the Patani district of southern Siam’ (Kahn 2006:174-5).

Malaya and the Dutch East Indies included GC, Beka, Odeon, Columbia (US), Columbia Graphophone Company (UK), Hindenburg, Pagoda, Polyphon, Polydor, Lyrophon, Pathe, Tio Tek Hong, Canary, Tjap Angsa, Delima, Yokimtjan, Telefunken, Anken, Chap Kuching and Chap Singa.² Recordings of performers from British Malaya were sold in the Dutch East Indies, and vice versa. For British Malaya, recording studios and orchestras were based in Singapore, and most performers lived in or travelled to Singapore to make recordings.

As the recording engineers made short recording trips, could not speak the local languages, and had no knowledge about the local musics, they depended on local agents who arranged for places to set up the recording equipment such as hotel rooms or rented houses, recommended artistes and repertoire for recording, and helped to negotiate payments for artistes. The local agents appointed by the respective companies in Malaya also sold and distributed the records (Gaisberg 1946: 59, 64, Want 1976: 730,732).

Amusement parks set up by transnational Chinese companies like the Shaw Brothers played a major role in disseminating the new popular music to large audiences. These parks provided entertainment in the form of *bangsawan* performances, dance halls, Chinese opera, movies, boxing and game stalls, and were widely accessible, even to the working class, costing only 10 cents to enter.³ Besides live *bangsawan* performances, gramophone music was played at the amusement parks throughout the

² See Yampolsky (2010a and 2010b), Gronow (1981) and Tan (1996/97, 2013) for descriptions of the different recording companies and labels in the first half of the twentieth century. It should be noted that Pagoda, Hindenburg, Polydor, and Polyphon were not separate companies.

³ See Wong and Tan (2004) and van der Putten (2010) for descriptions of the three amusement parks in Singapore (New World, Great World and Happy World). The amusement parks exemplified 'the modern patterns of consumption and commodification of entertainment such as music, dance and theatre' (van der Putten 2010:19).

night for all to hear. It was reported that that a ‘portable gramophone... play[ing] Chap Kuching records’ was placed at the entrance to the theatre at Great World (*The Malaya Tribune*, 11 July 1934).

Live performances called *pentas nyanyian* (song stage) featuring songs sung by the artistes who recorded them were often held at the parks, especially before the screening of talkies. At one such event several HMV recording artistes including ‘S. Abdullah, Celebrated Singer and Kronchong Artiste’, ‘Miss Tarminah (Semarang), HMV Recording Artiste’ and ‘Miss Amelia (Bandoeng), Reputable Kronchong Singer of Chap Singer [sic] were presented in the Fun and Frolic Stadium in Singapore on 5, 6 and 7 August (*Sunday Gazette*, 31 July 1938).

Local Types of Cosmopolitan and Hybrid Music

Popular music derived from Malay folk music

A large part of the recorded *bangsawan* repertoire of the pre-World War II period was derived from Malay folk social dance music (*ronggeng*) such as *asli*, *inang*, *joget* and *zapin*. Other forms of social music recorded included the *dondang sayang*, *kronchong* and various types of music with *gambos* accompaniment. Many of these social dance genres were performed at social occasions such as weddings and other festivities in various parts of Malaya. They were adapted by the commercial urban *bangsawan* theatre, and performed in the stories and extra turns.⁴

⁴ See Tan (1993) and Matusky and Tan (2004) for analyses of *bangsawan* songs and Malay social dance music. In *bangsawan*, slow-paced *asli* songs were often sung as *lagu nasib* [song of fate] or *lagu sedih* [sad song] to accompany characters who were in extreme sorrow. Fast-paced *asli* accompanied dances and happier songs. *Inang* became associated with lighter dramatic situations such as lovers and dancers in the garden. *Joget* songs accompanied fighting scenes. *Zapin* songs were performed during sad scenes or to accompany dance. All four genres were popular in the extra turns.

Through the gramophone, social folk music evolved into modern popular genres. In order to attract multi-ethnic urban audiences, new musical arrangements and melodies were composed. In the 1930s, the *bangsawan* musicians altered the folk *ronggeng* ensemble (comprising a violin, 2 *rebana* frame drums and a gong) by replacing some of the instruments. A piano was often added while the Western drum set was used in place of the frame drum. Sometimes the ensemble was supplemented with a plucked bass and extra violins. The new *ronggeng* ensemble was influenced by the Tin Pan Alley music of the gramophone and the Hollywood talkie. The emphasis was on memorable melodies, and the musical renditions were limited to three minutes per side of a record.

Despite their transcultural influences, the recorded songs retained Malay elements. The new arrangements used the form of the Malay *pantun*⁵ and were sung to various *ronggeng* rhythms. The singers used the nasal Malay singing style with a fairly narrow and tense vocal width.

Examples 1

Lagu Melayu (Malay song), *Hiburan Raja Ahmad Beradu* (Song of Entertainment for Raja Ahmad While He Rests), from Malay historical play 'Puteri Gunong Ledang', HMV, P 12761, 1930s (More Malay elements), Malay *asli* rhythm, sparse western triads, western and Malay instruments (piano, violin and Malay frame drum), Malay folk singing style, minor third intervals in Chinese pentatonic scale.

⁵ Many of the *asli*, *inang* and *joget* recorded songs had texts which corresponded to *pantun* subjects such as *kasih* (love), *kanak-kanak* (children), *nasihat* (advice), *budi* (good deeds), *agama* (religion), *jenaka* (comedy), *sindiran* (scorn), *teka-teki* (riddles) and *nasib* (fate). HMV catalogues used these categories to differentiate the songs.

Example 2

Lagu Klasik (Classical Song), *Penceraian Jula Juli dengan Sultan* (The Separation of Jula Juli from the Sultan) from play 'Jula Juli Bintang Tiga' (Third Star Jula Juli), Chap Kuching (*Cat label*) NG 30, 1930s (more Western elements), Western waltz rhythm and melody, western instruments (trumpet, Hawaiian guitar, piano) and harmony. Lyrics in Malay, Malay singing style.

Example 3

Lagu Hindustani, *Tandi Tandi* (Tijah, HMV, P. 16489, 1930s) (harmonium, tabla, piano; waltz rhythm (Indian elements) short unmetered introduction (alap) by the harmonium and voice and vocal ornamentations (such as slides between notes and vibrato at melismatic phrases) linked to Indian folk singing.

Anglo-American Popular music with Topical Texts about Progress

The other section of the recorded Malay songs of the 1930s till the 1950s consisted of popular music based on Anglo-American and Latin American social dance music, which were sung in Malay. Music for dances such as the waltz, tango, foxtrot and rumba were originally performed by dance bands at the British clubs, but were later adopted by local bands in the *bangsawan* extra turns and at cabaret dance halls in the amusement parks. The new dance music and rhythms appealed to consumers as they were 'up-to-date' and resembled the trendy Anglo-American pop music in European and American films.

Malay popular songs derived from pre-World War II Anglo-American pop were accompanied by ensembles known as *orkestra Melayu* (Malay orchestra), which also played at *bangsawan* performances, cabarets,

hotels, silent films, wedding parties and funerals. These orchestras were adapted from the Anglo-American dance bands and orchestras of visiting theatrical troupes, which also resembled Tin Pan Alley ensembles. By the 1930s, a typical *orkestra Melayu* consisted of violin, trumpet, trombone, flute, clarinet, piano, double bass, guitar and drums,⁶ but new instruments were constantly being incorporated. With the rising popularity of Hawaiian-style dance music in the 1930s, the Hawaiian guitar and ukulele were added. As new jazz sounds gained currency, the saxophone was quickly absorbed. Following a growing interest in Latin American dance rhythms (such as the rumba and tango), Latin American percussion instruments (maracas, claves, woodblock, and so on) were included.

This type of music that derived from Anglo-American pop was known as *Lagu Melayu*; it exhibited a degree of stylistic regularity in instrumentation and format. There was a tendency to use Tin Pan Alley instrumentation and to compress lengthy improvisations into three-minute formats. Some singers began to switch to the open-throated crooning style of singing associated with Anglo-American popular music. The new instruments, strophic structure, dance rhythms and crooning style of singing were considered modern.

Nevertheless, these modern songs helped in educating, modernizing and raising the consciousness of the Malays. Through their lyrics, musicians engaged with the ideas of reform and progress, which flowed through the Malay world in the 1930s and early 1940s. They contributed to the contemporary discourses about how to create a more progressive or

⁶ See Tan (1993:chap. 5) for a description of the origins of the *orkestra Melayu*. The number of instruments used for a performance depended on the availability of musicians. The *orkestra Melayu* was the forerunner of the Orkes RTM (Radio and Television Malaysia Orchestra), the main ensemble which performs instrumental music and accompanies singers on RTM

advanced society, issues that were being debated in the Malay press and other literature by modernist reformist Muslims and Malay nationalists during the 1930s till the 1950s in British Malaya and throughout the greater Malay world (Kahn 2006; Milner 1995). To catch the attention of listeners, and to sound modern, these lyrics were often sung to catchy melodies superimposed on upbeat dance rhythms such as the waltz, foxtrot, tango and rumba.

For instance, the HMV and Chap Singa (Lion Brand) singer, Ahmad CB, called on audiences to “wake up from sleep” and to “pursue knowledge”. In an interview with the author, Ahmad CB stressed that as he “travelled from island to island ... while earning a living, he was educating the young ... (and) ... educating the community so that they could move forward”.⁷ He declared that his performance group staged many songs and stories that called on children to “wake up” (*bangun anak-anak*). He sang the following song to me, which he had recorded with Chap Singa (personal communication, Ahmad CB, 17 April, Kuala Lumpur, 1986):

Bangun Anakku (Wake up My Child) (Ahmad CB, Chap Singa, 1938)

*Bangun anakku dari tidurmu / Semua kawan-kawanmu sudah menunggu /
Jikalaunya sudah, segera berpakaian / Menuntut ilmu, jangan-jangan
dilupakan / Ini semua demi masa depan.*

Wake up my child from your sleep / All your friends are waiting / If you have woken up, quickly get dressed / Pursue knowledge, do not forget / All this is for the future.

New types of comic songs began to appear in the recorded repertoire of HMV and its subsidiaries in British Malaya in the 1930s till the 1950s.

⁷ ‘*pulau ke pulau jalan sambil cari makan sambil kita bimbingan anak-anak, bimbing masyarakat supaya boleh maju sikit*’ (personal communication, Ahmad CB, 1986).

These songs explored topical issues, such as the plight of taxi drivers and trishaw men, and included comments on poverty and the problems of ordinary people in Malayan society. They also criticized the weaknesses of local people, for example their gambling and womanizing. These songs were often enlivened by humour in the tone of voice and in the lyrics. These songs cut across ethnic lines, combining Chinese, Indian and Western elements, and used upbeat dance rhythms such as rumba and tango. Sung in different dialects, the songs dealt with the experiences and problems of all the ethnic communities in Malaya in a comic way. They helped the audiences make sense of the new colonial world they were living in and the changes in lifestyles of people living in the cities.

Comic songs often used *bahasa pasar* (market or colloquial Malay), which juxtaposed different languages spoken in the daily lives of ordinary urban folk. They added phrases in English, Tamil, Hindustani, and even some Chinese dialects to comment on personal, ethnic, and social problems, or to appeal to the social conscience of the audience. Comical songs such as *Yam Choi Chow* (Drink Alcohol, Mohd. Yatim, HMV, NAM 13, 1950s) and *Kling Mabok* (The Drunken Indian, Aman Ballon and Leiman SS, HMV, P 22900, 1940s) incorporated Cantonese, Tamil, and Malay texts, and commented on the consequences of drinking alcohol.

Example 4

Yam Choi Chow (Mohd. Yatim, Nam 13, 1950s) mixes Malay, English (caps) and Cantonese (italics):

MY DARLING BROKE MY HEART
HEART

Yi kar ngo mo SWEETHEART
Ngo yo lok soon badan kutak sehat
Ngo pangkau sama nyamok and moksat.
lice.

MY DARLING BROKE MY

Now I do not have a SWEETHEART
I am ugly my body is not fit
I sleep together with mosquitoes and

Comic songs that concerned ordinary working people of all races and their troubles were also popular. *Saudagar Minyak Urat* (The Nerve Oil Merchant, Aman Ballon King Clown Nooran Opera & HMV Orchestra, HMV, P 13078, 1948), *Che' Mah Dengan Tukang Becha* (Che' Mah and the Trishaw Man, Aman Ballon, P 13179, 1940s), and *Uncle Murtabak* (Pan-Fried Bread Uncle, Mohd. Yatim, HMV, P 22945, 1950s) describe the hardships faced by the Malay nerve oil merchant, the Chinese trishaw puller, and the *murtabak* seller respectively.

The police inevitably harassed the small businessmen such as the murtabak seller:

Uncle Murtabak tersalah cakap/ Mata gelap datang tangkap Kena masuk dalam lokap/ Central polis tiga tingkat.

Uncle Murtabak said the wrong words/ The police came to catch him He had to enter the lock up/ [In the] third floor of the Police Central.

These comical songs provided an insight into significant social changes in the Malayan cities and formed a tradition that prevailed in the songs of other post-Independence musicians such as P. Ramlee (1960s and 1970s), Hang Mokhtar (1990s) and Rampa (1990s).

In tandem with the rise of nationalism, songs about the love of the country and different races living together such as *Lagu Malaya* (Chap Singa, QF 87, Ahmad CB, 1935) were composed. According to the film magazine, *Filem Melayu* (1 May, 1941), Mem Tuan Hemsley, the wife of the Manager of Sharikat Record Chap Singa (Lion Brand Record Company) wanted to record a song that praised the beauty of the country and the different races living in it. The article continues to say that Ahmad C.B was commissioned to write the tune and the Malay text; the song contained the 'voices of many including Malays, Chinese, Indians, Eurasians, Manila (Filipinos), Portuguese and English.' Patriotic songs that encouraged youths to unite and work towards achieving Independence

[*Merdeka*] were also recorded by songwriters such as Zubir Said and Ahmad CB during the post-war period:

Pemuda Melayu (Malay Youths) (Ahmad CB and Osman Ahmad Orchestra, HMV, N 238, 1950s)

Pemuda mesti berbakti/ Membela ibu pertiwi
Marilah bersama bertegak bersatu/ Merdeka tetaplah Merdeka

Youths must be loyal/ Uphold (our) motherland
Let us together stand upright and unite/ Independence (is) definite

Cosmopolitan Lives

Not only did the musicians actively advocate a broader type of Malayness through hybridity and flexibility in their music, they also experienced this openness in their lives. For them, there were no borders in the greater Malay world. The majority of the pre-World War II recording artistes were *bangsawan* performers, who came from a variety of backgrounds. They originated from, performed in and travelled all over Malaya, Southern Thailand, Sumatra, Java and Borneo. They interacted with and married into the many and varied ethnic groups of the archipelago; they spoke and performed in various languages and dialects; they were part of and identified with a diverse and mobile group of people living in the greater Malay world. Many were of mixed parentage. They spent long periods of time outside Malaya, and exchanged knowledge and learnt from one another and from performers from China, India, the Middle East, Europe and the Philippines (Tan 1993; Cohen 2002). The following three biographies illustrate this cosmopolitan community.

Mr Ahmad CB, an HMV and Chap Singa singer, was born in Medan, Sumatra, in 1915. He followed his father, a merchant, to Trengganu and later to Singapore. After performing with a *bangsawan* group in Singapore, he set up his own *sandiwara* group, Asmara Dana, in Medan,

and toured Malaya, Sumatra and Riau. Later he formed *Hiburan Malam Gembira* (Happy Night Entertainment), an entertainment group which staged singing, dancing, drama and comedy acts at amusement parks in all the states of Malaya (personal communication, 1986). From the time he was five years old, Ahmad CB moved back and forth between British Malaya and the Dutch East Indies. He was most famous for his songs *Kachang Goreng* (Fried Peanuts), *Bunga Harum* (Scented Flowers) and *Malaya*.

Miss Aminah Nani (also known as Minah Alias), HMV recording artiste and *bangsawan* prima donna, was born in Singapore in 1919. She performed in her father's troupe, the Genani Opera, when she was a child, and later joined Dean's Tijah opera which took her to Sarawak, Pulau Bangka, Bali and Java. She studied Javanese and Balinese dance with Miss Riboet when she was in Java (personal communication, 1986). She was known for her *lagu Melayu (asli)*, including *Seri Mersing* and *Kuala Kedah*.

Mr Khairudin bin Umair-ruddin (commonly known as Dean or Tairu), a *bangsawan* hero and owner of the famous Dean's Tijah Opera, was born in Hong Kong in 1890. His mother was Chinese and his father was a sailor of Indian descent who sailed between Singapore and Hong Kong. Dean went to an English school in Hong Kong and could speak English, Cantonese and Hindustani. After following his father to Singapore, he joined Wayang Yap Chau Tong, Wayang Kassim, the Star Opera and the Jaya Opera. He and his wife Che Wan Tijah (another famous Chap Kuching singer from Pontianak) performed widely in Malaya, Sumatra, Java and Bangkok (Edrus 1960:160-4; *Berita Filem*, 2, 1960; *Straits Echo*, 24 May 1934). He was best known for his songs *Selamat Tinggal* (Goodbye), *Wang* (Money) and *Ali Baba*.

Concluding Remarks

Malay popular music of the gramophone era was cosmopolitan, inclusive and challenged British control of the hearts and minds of the Malaysians. It drew on many sources: the globalized music of Tin Pan Alley, Hollywood and other parts of the world; the commercial concerns and technology of the gramophone recording industry, based in Europe; and the hybrid cosmopolitan experiences of the musicians and audiences living in the colonial port cities. Equally important is the fact that the *Lagu Melayu* engaged with the discourses about nationalism, modernity and the way forward that were promoted in the newspapers, literature and radio.