

Musical Practice of Malay 'traditional' forms

Malay Community

Much has been written about the little that is known about pre 19th century Singapore, among the recent works being the Singapore History Museum's *Early Singapore 1300s - 1819: Evidence in Maps, text and Artefacts*. However, references to music can be found in the classical Malay text *Sejarah Melayu* (Malay Annals) that traces the origins and descent of Malay royalty. Although the *Sejarah Melayu* is a work belonging to more traditional literary genre than history, it nevertheless provides some clue to what type of music could have been performed and heard in prior to the arrival of the British. Here, mention is made of the queen of Bintan, Iskandar Shah who is said to have been the first to use or instituted the *nobat*, which refers to both a drum as well as a royal orchestra that performs during a ruler's coronation, *Bagindalah yang pertama nobat, maka diturut oleh segala raja-raja yang di bawah angin ini*.¹ The significance of the *nobat* lies in that it is believed that the ruler will not be accepted unless the *nobat* is played. More interestingly however, according to the *Sejarah Melayu*, Iskandar Shah was the mother of Sang Nila Utama, the founder of Singapore.² Excavations by historian and archaeologist John Miksic however has not revealed any musical instruments although Miksic does mention the limitation of his work owing to extraneous factors. Miksic also points out objects that have yet to be identified. Nevertheless, he does however suggest that Fort Canning was once the site of religious activity, craftsmen's workshops and a palace. *FTC can be interpreted as a craftsmen's quarters within a palace and temple precinct, as artisans were common residents in traditional Southeast Asian royal compounds*.³ Given both Miksic's findings as well as the claim that Sang Nila Utama was the son of the Queen of Bintan who instituted the *nobat*, one could assume then that some sort of a royal orchestra would have existed at some point in time prior to the 19th century. Moreover, if there was a temple precinct, which served in the context of worship, other forms of musical practice would also have been likely.⁴ But aside from music in the court and as well as music for worship, there was also public music. In the tenth section of *Sejarah Melayu* that tells of the legend of Singapore being attacked by swordfish and its subsequent fall to the Javanese, there is reference to a song that was created by the public. According to the legend, a young boy saved the island from the swordfish attack through fortifying its coast with banana tree trunks. During this time, as recounted by the *Sejarah Melayu*, the king's sleeve was torn by a swordfish during one of the attacks. This incident gave rise to a song:

Pada suata riwayat,
daripada deras lompat todak itu,
datang ke atas gajah,
kena baju Paduka Seri Maharaja,
carik lenganny;
maka dibuatkan orang nyanyi:

Carik baja raja,
Di lompati todak;
Bukan disahaja
Sebab akal budak

By 1827, however, there was musical activity of some sort as evident in an account of the celebration of King George IV's birthday in the April 26th issue of the *Singapore Chronicle* held by the Resident of Singapore, at that time, Robert Fullerton: *On the 23rd the Hon: the Resident gave an entertainment in celebration of the anniversary of His Majesty's birth, unequalled perhaps in the annals of Singapore festivity. As night approached, the Government Hill was lighted up with innumerable lamps....from a distance the appearance of one mass of flames which must have been visible for many miles to sea-ward.....On the grassy brow of the hill were spread mats in a square of considerable extent, surrounded by seats which received the visitors as they arrived whilst the area was occupied by a groupe of **Javanese musicians and dancers**. The music of these performances was, to our ear at least, not unpleasing, but the dancing of the Javanese, if this could be considered a fair specimen of it, has little to recommend it....the sex of these professors formed matter of considerable speculation but whichever it may have been formed they formed a curious and characteristic groupe which occupied the attention of the company.....when one considers the way in which censorship prevailed over published newspaper texts, the coda to this article is most revealing not only by its late inclusion but by its nonchalance....we have made a large omission in leaving out His Highness the Sultan who, and also the second son of the late Temangong, were present at dinner and during the evening. The former appeared in high good humour and pleased with everything going on around him.*⁵

Not much prevails in the English versions of the newspapers. However, the presence of a number of dances well established in Singapore cannot be denied when the Theatres Ordinance of 1895 extended the boundaries and definitions of theatre which *includes any theatre room booth or other place open to the public or any class of the public in theatre which there is carried on any stage-play circus*

*conjuring, dancing, wayang, mayong, mundu, joget, ronggeng or other operatic or theatrical performance of any sort whatever.*⁶ (emphasis mine)

The purpose of this ordinance was to ensure that a permit would have to be obtained in order to validate its performance. Details are scarce but slightly further down the list of guidelines are: *The Chief Police Officer may withdraw any license if in his opinion the theatre licensed is a public nuisance or is an annoyance to the persons living near or having their place of work or business near or if any riot unlawful gaming or misbehaviour has taken place therein or if any performance therein is of an indecent immoral or improper nature or if the theatre has been kept open beyond the hours stated in the license or in contravention of any Municipal By-laws. The Chief Police Officer shall if required furnish the licensee with the grounds of such withdrawal in writing. Notice of such withdrawal shall be served on the licensee if he can be found and shall also be affixed to the theatre.*⁷

Music was evidently in practice, either from Java or in Singapore of Javanese origin or both. Craig Lockard's descriptions arrive a little later in the twentieth century although the assumption is Malaya which would have included Singapore: *Before World War II, popular culture among Malays was dominated by traditional and folk arts—often with regional or local flavour—or by more modernised or syncretic variations on traditional themes. Traditional Malay music long pre-dates the arrival of Western culture and chiefly involves gamelan-type instruments such as gongs, drums, flutes and those with affinities to Islamic cultures. In the words of a Malaysian culture scholar, music played an important role in upholding the social structure of the time.....the world-view of the traditional society, music and political ideology coincided. Musical instruments formed part of the royal regalia.....[and] are believed to have supernatural powers.*⁸

In her academic exercise, *Popular Music and Contemporary Malay Society* (1994), Siti Shaireen Selamat conducted a preliminary study of Malay pop music in Singapore with two themes in mind:

1. Music as a means of cultural and ethnic identification
2. Music as a source of social commentary and ideology

It would seem that popular culture among the Malay community was dominated by traditional and folk-arts. There was often a strong regional flavour to them with some modernised and syncretic variations on traditional themes. Several musical styles dominated this period;

1. Keronchong
2. Ghazal

3. Boria,
4. Asli, and
5. Joget.

Each musical form had a distinctive style of performance with a specific rhythmic characteristic and an ornamental style of singing. It was possible to associate the musical style with a geographical place...dikir barat (rhythmic chanting of verses) was favoured by those from Kelantan; boria (group choral singing with dance routines) dominated in Penang and ghazal in Johor. Until the proliferation of Music of Popular culture in the Malay community, popularity in music was arrived at via practice of the more traditional forms, or to use Howard Becker's term solidified conventions. Joseph E.E. Peters⁹ offers us details of some of these popular traditional practices.

Pantun

This is a Malay literary poetic form closely identified in **dondang sayang** (an event for love songs). **Pantun** is also commonly used as a structural support for musical forms such as **bangsawan** (opera), **asli** (native songs) and **dikir barat** (chorus and movement). The skill in performing these poems is to recite in a way to suggest a form of singing while at the same time conjure up the ability to engage in quick, witty and subtle dialogue, usually in relation to questions and issues of the daily existence of the common folk. **Pantun** can be written in **dua baris** (couplet) or **empat baris** (quatrain). The main **pantun** line/s depending on the 2 or 4-line structure is the thematic focus. However, the **pembayang maksud** (shadow line) is the subtle point to be savoured. The **pantun** is regarded the high art of the Malay community. The Malay radio station in Singapore ran a very successful **pantun** programme in the 1980's called **Senda Mesra** (Cordial Banter) popular not only in Singapore and West Malaysia but also in Malay communities in Southern Thailand, Brunei, Riau Islands (East Indonesia) and even Perth. This programme presented **pantun** in dialects of Minangkabau, Bugis and Javanese. **Pantuns** are known to be the purveyor and conveyor of Malay Customs (**adat**) and manners (**adab**). Older Malay **pantuns** are noted to be great collections of traditional Malay views of life and the world around them, serving as a vehicle for conservation. **Pantuns** are generally created in styles portraying **sindir** (indirect references) and **kias** (analogies). In the days when the Malay communities lived in a **kampong** setting (village), the art of **pantun** laced conversation at important social celebrations, ritual relating to major life-cycle events like marriage, birth, initiation, agreements, contracts and entertainment. Since the transformation of Singapore, practice of the **pantun** had been reduced to a few specialised groups. Its

run into oblivion has been stemmed by intervention by politicians, academics and artists.

Kuda Kepang

This dance form originated from East Java and was popular at wedding in Singapore. Commonly as the ‘horse dance’—the dance is said to be about warrior horsemen and victory celebrations; stiff cardboard cutouts of gaily coloured horses are attached to the dancers, giving the feel that they are victoriously riding on horses. A reduced version of the Javanese gamelan is the usual musical accompaniment. In the original dance, the stories were exclusively from the Indian epics, the **Ramayana** and the **Mahabharata**. **Kuda kepong** came to Singapore through the migration patterns of East Javanese as well as the movement of this dance form and the gamelan through the Malay courts. The kuda kepong form in Johor was unique in that the gamelan was used to accompany the dance and this form influenced the early Singapore version. It lost most of its popularity after World War II, through the shift in preferences in the younger generation to contemporary popular musical styles and its association with trance and therefore, evil spirits and /or drunkenness, arising largely out of misrepresentations of the dance. In 1971, Raden Suparti Raden Emam formed a troupe, Kesenian tarian Kuda Kepang Putra Putri Unggal Wenang, with the idea of disassociating the dance with trance and re-popularise it. Nazri Bin Othman points out in his study, *the Kuda Kepang practice survives especially among the Singapore Javanese despite the presence of opposition from others in the Muslim community in Singapore. These practitioners hold strongly to their principle that the Kuda Kepang is an ancient cultural practice that must be protected as a heritage.*

Asli

The term **asli** is a collective reference to Malay heritage. James Chopyak informs us *the word asli literally means ‘original’ and is derived from the word ‘asal’ which means origin.*¹⁰ While the denotative meanings count for problems in connotative meanings, Asli has been used by practitioners to refer to old, traditional or semi-traditional music or style or performance. It can also be used to refer to a particular musical genre. This genre has regional variations but generally acknowledges developments out of the **dondang saying** (love lullaby) genre.¹¹ The term asli is often used to describe a style of singing. In summary, Chopyak informs us of the variety of meanings attached to Asli¹²:

1. A particular rhythmic pattern
2. A particular tempo
3. A particular song genre
4. a particular instrumental grouping

5. A particular style of singing
6. An old or traditional Malay music

Nevertheless, where songs are concerned, they reflect a distinctive Malay musical heritage (Yusnor Ef, 1994). An **asli** song is highly melismatic and uses pantun for its lyrics which could be about anything ranging from love stories to nature, patriotism and nationalism. Chopyak argues that the text in asli is fixed and written in advance but in practice, performed in a highly improvised style.¹³ It is performed in slow duple or quadruple meter and accompanied by a flute, violin, hand-drum, gong, guitar and piano-accordion. The genre of asli songs performed today consists of mainly songs written for entertainment like stage works or film and use major-minor diatonicism. However, the melodic lines are still coloured by melismatic features from a previous tradition which allow for the label asli. Flexibility of style allows for the use of instruments outside the tradition.

Craig Lockard observes the overall presence of **asli** which had more than one meaning: *essentially a modernised or popularised folk music including folk songs, pop songs in a folk style, instrumental pieces, and dances in various styles, with the joget as the best known; asli also refers to a style of song with a distinctive rhythmic characteristics, as well as to an ornamental style of singing.*¹⁴ *Some types of asli were closely identified with bangsawan and often incorporated popular Western dance beats. Traditional music persists side by side with modern music but has taken on some modern influences. For example, the violin has been adopted for the ronggeng, joget, and dondang sayang.*¹⁵ A Straits Times caption advertising a show at the Alhambra in the tells us of the *Re-appearance of Irving Aaronson and his Commanders in a Selection of Numbers followed by a musical number of special interest to Music lovers Duci De Kerek Jarto whose rendering of violin selections delighted audiences on his last appearance here...*¹⁶

Tony Danker who played in the David Lincoln Keronchong Orchestra between 1938 and the outbreak of WWII offers his own perspective on **asli**....*They were good singers, like Miss Julia singing in the keronchong...they used to sing the lagus and aslis, as you call them...in those days they used to call it nasib...lagu nasib... I'm not sure...but in those days they used to call it lagu nasib....now that's changed to asli....and that was very simple...one bass and one violinist and they had the kompong (percussion drum)...you had to know how to hit it....because if you'd hit it the wrong way...otherwise you'd just complicate things...certain beats you'd move to the beat...themes, lyrics...mostly they were based on love...the lyrics were written so that everybody wanted to talk about or sing about or listen to....once in a while you'd get a song about lovesickness....death of mum...the loss*

of a mother then was a big issue...that upped the sale of records...out of sympathy. That drove the very strong message of family ties... ..but most of these songs the highest sales were actually made not by the Malays but by the Peranakans....those keronchong orchestras with Malays acting in it...but we had Chinese singers, you know...Lily Toh....she used to sing keronchong...she only recorded four songs but it sold very well in those days because she was Peranakan...keronchong, asli and lagu nasib [were] taken up more by the Peranakans.¹⁷

Dondang Sayang

It is one of the forms centrally reliant on the **pantun** structure. According to Peters¹⁸, Two possible origins exist; one source claims origins in Rhio Lingga in the 12th century and attributed to a love song written for Princess Wan Bernai of Binan island. Another origin is in the courts of the Malacca Sultanate during the 14th & 15th centuries where the **pantun** was the medium of entertainment during the festivities among the royal families and nobles. This practice witnessed the introduction of musical instruments like the **rebab** (violin), **rebana** (hand-drum) and **tenawak** (gong). Its popularity allowed for it to be spread to major traditional festivals of the people and later for general social occasions. When the Portuguese arrived in 1511, it was one form that not only found favour but grew in popularity. The proliferation meant the infiltration of the Western violin, accordion and guitar in these songs as well as the leaning towards major-minor diatonicism. The **rebab** was one of the traditional instruments began to disappear from this genre. The Peranakan community in Malacca played a significant role in developing another version of dondang sayang. There were two sectors in this community; the Baba-Nonyas (mixture of Chinese and Malay cultures) and the Chettiars (mixture of Tamil and Malay cultures). It was the Baba-Nonya culture that developed significantly as a community and spread to other parts of Malaya and to Singapore. Tony Beamish, writing in 1954, informs us of *the haunting “dondang sayang” a musical setting of the spontaneous Malay “pantun”. This is sung almost exclusively in the Malacca district, though some effort is now being made to keep the art alive in other places, such as Penang and Singapore. Both the Malays and many Straits-born Chinese excel at sustained improvisation, both of words and music, and a song session may well last half the night, continuing until the singers often from rival villages, drop with exhaustion. This form of inter-village competition, salted with robust but friendly ridicule, seems in Malaya to take the place of country darts matches in England. Many people are unaware of the great wealth of Malay folk music in the country, because they do not often get a chance to hear it. Nevertheless it ranks as an important part of Malaya’s artistic heritage. As it is not written down, there is always a risk of it dying out, but this is unlikely for several reasons.*

- *The music gains strength from its readiness to absorb new ideas.*
- *The Malay rulers give it strong support.*
- *Energetic steps are being taken by Radio Malaya to preserve it on records and to arouse wider interest in it by broadcasting.*
- *But the main reason why the music is still played and sung in the kampongs today is because the villagers revel in it, a sure guarantee of survival in the face of the strongest competition.*

The greatest competitor of this old Malay folk music is in fact the Western dance band.¹⁹

Currently, both the Malay and Baba forms of **dondang sayang** are in practice. The main difference between the Malay and Baba versions of **dondang sayang** lies in the use of language in the **pantun**. The Baba language is a pidgin version of Malay slanted with much from Chinese dialects, particularly Hokkien. The melodic lines are less melismatic than the **asli** version. Additionally, the Malay version of **dondang sayang** is accompanied by violin, gong and hand-drum. The **pantun** dialog is usually the highlight of the **dondang sayang** event. A number of such dialogues happen and each is usually sung by two persons (most often male and female), engaging in “trading wits” and comments on any issue. The **pantun** sessions are interspersed with dancing episodes where **joget** and **ronggeng** are featured most. Improvisation plays a crucial role here in the creation of text in the highly stylized and structured template of the pantun.

The late Pak Malim Asman, who directed the Orkes Aslirama, launched a Dondang Sayang club and they were featured regularly on television between 1982 and 1985. Pak Malim even tried performances at the beach on a Saturday night to create a wider base of appreciation. Today a handful of troupes are left—**Dendang Semudra** and **Dendang Asli** to mention two. **Dendang Semudra** has even taken the effort to learn Mandarin to appeal to the Mandarin speaking population and perhaps regain the Chinese Peranakan community from there. The Baba version of dondang sayang is exclusively performed by the Peranakans through the Gunung Sayang Association which was formed in 1910. It actively promotes all manner of Peranakan arts through public performances/displays and radio and television.

Hadrah and Kompang

This genre is said to have arrived from the Middle East via India as early as 13th century through trading activities. We are informed of its possible origins where the work hadrah is derived from hadir, which is taken to mean “to present” something in lieu of a performance or a demonstration or a ceremony. It is suggested that merchants from the Middle-east used this hadrah (hand-drum) to

attract customers to their wares, hence the connotation after time through the form of the performance. The *kompang*, it is suggested, has onomatopoeic derivations, from the impressions of the sound made when beating this hand-drum.²⁰ Essentially, the hand-drum used in the *hadrah* and *kompang* belong to the *rebana* family of drums, the largest of which, the *rebana bedah*, is used at mosques. *Hadrah* and *kompang* music spread through the Malay region of Southeast Asia with the advent of Islam and took on different shades of development at different destinations. It came to Singapore in the early part of this century (Ahmad Azmi suggests 1920s from the Riau Islands)²¹ and was prominent in the years after the Japanese Occupation. According to Peters, music associated with the *hadrah* and *kompang* seems to have survived in choral forms which are closely linked to rhythms accompanied by *rebana* (hand-drums). Two types exist—the *rebana hadrah* (with small clinkers attached to them) and *rebana kompang* (large hand-drums without clinkers). The songs used in both forms are taken from the **Dewan Hadrah**, which is the traditional repertoire, and the **Barzanzi** scriptures, where the religious repertoire in Arabic come from. The songs are performed in the style of chant and sung over interlocking rhythms classified as the lead, basic and rhythm beats and the form the music takes is shared by the *Hadrah* and *Kompang*. There are separate types of interlocking rhythms for the two categories of music. The *kompang* interlocking rhythms are usually faster and more extrovert. The major use of *hadrah* and *kompang* is at Malay weddings where the chanting of Arabic verses announces the arrival of the groom at the bride's house. It also features prominently during the *bersanding* (sitting in state) when the bride will be taken from her room to the *pelamin* (dais) for her relatives and friends to view her, and sometimes tease her as well. It is also common to hear this type of music at formal occasions like openings of conferences, inauguration of buildings, and other auspicious events. The *kompang* inter-locking rhythms are also basically three, but they have more variety and are usually faster and more extrovert than those of the “*Hadrah*”. In Singapore, the *Kompang* is performed in three major styles:²²

1. *Kompang Melayu*
2. *Kompang Jawa* – including:
 - a. *Kemplingan*,
 - b. *Kenterongan*,
 - c. *Pacitanan*,
 - d. *Terbangan*,
 - e. *Jidur*,
3. *Kompang Araban* which includes
 - a. *Zapin* and
 - b. *Marwas*

Diker Barat

This is another Malay choral form which has the pantun art very much as its central feature. Body movement, call-and-response between groups of singers to the accompaniment of musicians, chanting and body sounds are the other essential features of this music. There are strict rules for the creation and performance of song forms, as well as rules for the structure of the group. Diker Barat was introduced to Singapore from Kelantan in the 1940s. There is today a Singapore Diker Barat Federation which is very active in the promotion and development of this art form. Renewed interest in Diker Barat began in 1984 when a competition was held among junior colleges. Development through the 1980s happened at the school level with the former Singapore Broadcasting Corporation programme, Sennandung Rakyat (folk songs) telecasting them. Schools were keen to promote diker barat mainly because it helped with the teaching and learning of the Malay language. Not surprisingly, song creations had themes that reflected school and youth concerns like harmonious living, unity, courtesy, hard work and achievement. A diker barat ensemble has four key elements: the tok juara (leader); tukang karut (song initiator), the awok-awok (chorus) and the musicians. The tok juara establishes the theme and keeps the group together. The tukang karut is the key performer as this role requires a quick-witted person who has command of the art of pantun and who can initiate response or pose challenges to a competing diker barat team. The awok-awok provide colour and entertainment through their body movements and body sounds like clapping of hands and vocal interjections, and reinforce phrases from the tok juara or the tukang karut through repetition. Instruments used are the rebana ibu (large hand-drum), rebana anak (small hand-drum), tetawak (gong), canang/bonang (xylophone) and the rhomba (maracas). There has also been a trend to add the seruling (flute), serunai (oboe) and modern maracas. Songs are classified according to Lagu Juara (Tok Juara's song form), Lagu Karut (Tukang Karut's song form) and Wau bulan (concluding song form). Lagu karut has four sub-forms: karut pattanit, karut Kelantan, karut Yankee and karut matang, all of which have different ways of constructing the pantun. During a performance there are two diker barat groups sitting opposite each other. The rebana ibu gives the cue to begin the tepuk 10, a sequence of hand-clapping by the awok-awok. One group performs a juara song and one or two karut songs before the other takes over. They engage in a dialog, teasing each other in a friendly spirit through some humorous lyrics. This activity calls for much improvisation and the cue to end comes when the wau bulan is sung by one of the tukang karut after which the tepuk¹⁰ will be performed to round off the performance.

Ghazal

Ghazal is a relatively new genre of traditional music, originating in Johore in the late 19th century from Arab, Portuguese and Indian sources. According to Abdullah bin Mohamed, quoted in Chopyak, *the term ghazal is Arabic but passed into Persian, Turkish, Urdu and Malay and has acquired different meanings in these languages...in Arabic literature the ghazal is a poetic genre (Jahiliyah). It was a form of love poem, often also called 'the erotico-elgiac genre'...ghazal in Persian and Urdu has developed into a vehicle for serious poetry...in Malay, the ghazal is not a poetic or musical form: it is rather a name applied to a musical session, a sort of salon musical party, consisting of traditional Malay folksongs controlled and disciplined by a small number of musical instruments—mostly of foreign origin—with harmonium as the leader.*²³

The term ghazal seems to refer to:

1. A specific accompanying rhythm pattern
2. An instrumental group
3. the process of performing this music

There are variations in the orchestration used but a basic ghazal group includes a violin, guitar, gambus (oud), tambourine, maracas, two tabla, and one harmonium. On occasion, Chopyak informs us that the Malay rebana and gendang are used to supplement or replace the second tabla. The violin plays the basic melody with the guitar and gambus providing the countermelodies. The harmonium usually plays countermelodies as well as occasional thirds (major/minor). Ghazal tempo is usually twice that of asli. Mohd. Anis Mohd. Nor (1983) suggests that ghazal was used to accompany dance in Johore as early as 1956.²⁴

Zapin

Zapin began as an Arab Dance in the Middle East, absorbing Indian influences enroute to Malaya which included Singapore. Zapin in the present refers to:

- a. A Dance
- b. An instrumental ensemble
- c. A particular rhythmic pattern
- d. An implied melodic-rhythmic integration

While asli groups sometimes play a zapin, the most commonly used instrumentation for the form is a violin for the melody, a gambus, one or two large gendang, one or two small gendang, a harmonium, maracas, rebana, kompang and/or tambourine and an optional flute for countermelodies but for the most part, it is the gambus which usually stands out prominently from the rest of the

ensemble.²⁵ The rhythm of the melody of the zapin is closely integrated with the rhythm of the accompanying percussion instruments.

Larry Francis, in his study of the Zapin tradition in Malaysia offers his observations. Although practices in Malaysia and Singapore are similar they are still site-specific practices and therefore dependent on the socio-political and cultural contexts which cannot be converted into a one-to-one correspondence. However, there are some fundamental aspects of the practice which Francis observes:

*Zapin Melayu is sung in Malay...the rhythm is very clearly established and seems to correspond to a choreography more elegant and stately' although it may have more rhythmic variety...verses are repeated, the melodic line is much simpler. There are both male and female participants in the dance of Zapin Melayu...in Zapin Melayu, one must offer salaam.....sometimes its Indian style, sometimes its bowing.you have to salaam...same sequence...its like service to the Sultan. Malays stand or squat.... But they look at the audience....its eye-contact with the audience...contact with the audience because it's a staged performance. The conjecture is that Zapin is a court dance....its obligatory for the salaam to be offered to the Sultan. In my work I have discussed this in relation to Mak Yong....in all the court dances.*²⁶

In relation to song-texts, Larry Francis observed that that Zapin employs the use of pantun in the Malay style. There is an opening segment known as the **taksim**, which may be regarded as improvisatory in its articulation. The **taksim** is used to signify a solo performance played either by the *violin or gambus but normally the gambus is the main instrument. As there is opening (buka) there is also a closing segment (wainab/tutup)*.²⁷ According to Farid Alatas, *there is a place in Turkey called Taksim....it divides Europe from Asia at Istanbul...so taksim is the thing is that divides one part of a song from another...which is generally instrumental.*²⁸

Francis points out a Malay term **wainab** used in Zapin Melayu. Farid explains that in Zapin Arab, it was called wainak:

*When we went to Jakarta, including Ahmad Fadar...it was wainak which means where are you...rhetorical...asking God where He is...a call to God now that I have completed my devotion to you, show me your presence...concentrate on devotion to God like in **Ya badi il-Jamal**...the wasaal...means union with God....so after that you have not found God....so you ask, where are you? Its very Sufi.*²⁹

Whether or not the practice of Zapin appropriates Zapin Arab practices, among other more detailed aspects, is likely to engender further discussion and scholarship through field research.

Masri

Masri can be used to refer to

1. A dance
2. an implied melodic mode
3. Two basic rhythmic accompaniment patterns

Fundamentally, masri is music associated with a dance of the same name. The basic asli ensemble, sometimes with the addition of a large rebana or a gendang, is used to perform masri. There is no fixed tempo for masri.³⁰

Inang

The term refers to

1. A dance
2. three different accompanying rhythmic patterns
3. A style of performance

The word itself, inang (wet nurse) is found in the name for a dance (mak inang) and of a song (Mak Inang) that is written and most often performed in the style of masri. Inang is the most difficult genre to characterize because it does not refer to any specific musical elements, as much as it implies a style of performance. There is no specific inang rhythmic pattern. There is generally less percussive emphasis in the inang than there is in zapin performances. Some musicians point to a strong

Hindustani influence on inang, especially when a vocal part is included. On some occasions fast-paced masri patterns have been referred to as inang. However, Harding and Sarji³¹ point out that when P. Ramlee was working on the film **Penarik Becha**, he asked Habsah, mother of actress Hashimah Yon, who was an expert on dance and had toured Malaya with a theatre troupe since her youth. She recalled the Inang which was a Minangkabau dance that had a swaying movement. This was adapted to an “Inang baru” dance, performed by six couples, in traditional Malay costume, the choreography empathised Malay culture in movement. Suffice to say we are informed the Inang Baru dance took centre stage at every party, variety show or social gathering.

Joget/ Ronggeng

Joget has two literal meanings, dance and dancing girl. In its earliest usage Chopyak informs us that the term probably referred to female court dancers and dancers in the state of Pahang in West Malaysia. It would go some way to explain why P. Ramlee, in composing many songs in traditional Malay musical and dance genres, selected of all joget-joget, a **Joget Pahang**.³² The joget form was greatly influenced by the Portuguese, particularly during the Portuguese occupation of Malacca. Until the early 20th century, it was also known as a ronggeng. With the creation of the joget modern, joget as a term eventually replaced ronggeng as the name for the genre. Perhaps one of the main reasons for the popularity of the joget is that it is a social dance forming which male and female move flirtatiously around original form, used European (modern) instruments in an outdoor dancehall-like setting. Since it was not considered proper for unmarried Malay women to take part in such affairs, men could buy tickets to dance with professional female dancers, who were called ‘joget’.³³

Chopyak informs us of an early observation on joget from the Journal of the Indian Archipelago:

*The Malays are exceedingly fond of music and many have acquired a tolerable knowledge of the violin and play their national tunes and many European airs correctly, the drum appears to be the only native instrument, and for hours will a party of Malays amuse themselves by reciting verses accompanied by its monotonous tones. On the violin they will execute by ear all their own tunes and English jigs and Portuguese fandangos and will dance to the tunes with as much spirit as an Englishman at a fair; reels and jigs they manage well and will go through the Figures of the quadrille tolerably; it must be stated that the stolid country Malay seldom indulges in such amusements, those that reside near the town and the Jawibukans are fond of imitating their European neighbours.*³⁴

Traditionally, joget was accompanied by an ensemble essentially the same as the asli group: a violin for the melody, a large knobbed gong serving the colotomic function, a flute (optional) for countermelodies, and at least two rebana or two gendang for rhythmic accompaniment. The main characteristic of joget music is a fast-paced rhythm which emphasises duple and triple beat divisions in alternation and simultaneously. This characteristic rhythm is closely related to many European 6/8 dance forms, such as the tarantella and fandango.

Western influences were already evident in resident state or constabulary bands often staffed by Filipino or Goan musicians. It would not be difficult to assess the proliferation via oral influence of musical instruments from the European tradition. Given Singapore's receptiveness to changes in the absence of what Howard Becker calls solidified conventions, practices were likely to emerge as syncretic culture. Western style dance bands gathered momentum becoming popular with dance halls and cabarets while eclectic bands played Chinese or Malay Music using Western instruments. Surjan Singh informs us that the first police band in Singapore was formed in 1925. It was called the Straits Settlement Police Band. Its function, we are told, *was to add to the atmosphere and provide entertainment at police functions. We are also informed that following an audition held in India, successful candidates—all of them with musical background—were brought to Singapore to form a 32-instrument band.*³⁵ Alec Dixon recalls this development in a little more detail, It was about this time that the Regimental Bandmaster of the Royal Sussex Regiment, M. F. Minns, *was appointed in the rank of Chief Inspector to form the band of the Straits Settlement Police...One of Minns' musical achievements is worthy of record, for it occasioned some excitement among local Asiatics. From time to time he attended performances of the Malay Opera at the New World pleasure ground at Jalan Besar where he greatly attracted by some of the traditional Malay love songs. One evening he told me that he hoped to include some of these songs in the Band's repertoire, but explained that there were certain technical difficulties of a musical nature to be over come. However, he persisted in his self-appointed task, and some weeks later produced what he described as a 'Malay Medley' during a band concert given at Tanjong Katong. A large crowd of Malays and Straits-Chinese turned out to hear the music, and its delight was expressed in a great ovation for Minns and his band when the 'Medley' concluded with the familiar and haunting rhythm of Bandong. I doubt whether Europeans living in Singapore in the twenties were aware of the considerable musical talent to be found among the local Malays. The Kandang Kerbau police division had a very fine string orchestra, all of its players being Malay constables or NCOs. Their band of about twenty players was in great demand for local ronggengs and Malay*

weddings. *Many a European orchestra of great name and reputation might have envied its élan, its harmony and the perfection of its tempo.*³⁶

The cabarets of New, Happy and Great World seemed to have strong influences from the Cabarets from Shanghai, given that they were modelled after them. The New World became such a well-known entity that the management announced that *In response to numerous requests we have erected a building situated in the busiest parts of the ground, where firms who desire to display their samples for advertising purposes can now do so to the best advantage and at an economical rental. The primary object of this innovation is to develop it into a commercial museum which has proved a success in Java. Samples will be well cared for by the management. Charges for space and all further information may be had on application.*³⁷

Joget (modern Malay dance) and **Ronggeng** (traditional dance) were popular dance forms in 1950s. Various dance spots or nightclubs (the most famous of which was Bunga Tanjong at the New World Amusement Park), were the venues for their proliferation. The nightlife in Singapore revolved around amusement parks and these parks helped form hubs for other forms like **bangsawan** and Chinese opera before World War II (New World opened in 1923, Great World in 1931 and Happy World in 1936). Their significance cannot be discounted largely because people flocked to these clubs every night to dance **joget**, **ronggeng** as well as contemporary popular dance crazes such as cha-cha, rumba, tango to name a few. Popular band formation was enough to perform music for all of these types of dances, thus making it an economic possibility while at the same time lending variety and the ‘local’ flavour in entertainment.

By the late 1940s and 1950s a number of these traditions found themselves transformed either by appropriation of Western musical or instrumental influences. Yet as Lockard points out, all these popular and traditional forms, arrived at by synthesis of the foreign and indigenous, are considered today very much a part of Malay cultural tradition. Tony Beamish informs us of the presence of Music in culture in the sixth chapter suitably titled **Music and Letters**:

*The most typical rhythm of the peninsula is that of the ronggeng dance, played in the old days on the flute and drum.*³⁸

In a column on the British Malaya journal, with reference to old and new dances, we are informed of the observation that *Malayan youths are crazy over...the Joget modern...actually modern versions...The Joget is the modern style of dancing the old-fashioned Malay "ronggeng", with Latin-American rhythm and the samba, the*

*conga and the rumba steps to give it the thrilling life so lacking in the sedate "ronggeng" The modernising of the "ronggeng" was first effected in the Federal capital, Kuala Lumpur ...Nearly everybody was then going crazy over the samba, and as the rhythm was found to go well with Malay songs, it was introduced into the "ronggeng". Gradually, the violin, drum and gong of the "ronggeng" orchestra were augmented. The maracas and the trumpet were brought into play, then the microphone, then the percussion instruments of the rumba band...*³⁹

A similar point is made by Joseph Peters in his observation of a current practice in Malay tradition: **Joget** (modern Malay dance) and **Ronggeng** (traditional dance) became popular dance forms in 1950s. Various dance spots or nightclubs (the most famous of which was Bunga Tanjong at the New World Amusement Park), were the venues for their proliferation. The nightlife in Singapore revolved around amusement parks and these parks helped form hubs for other forms like **bangsawan** and Chinese opera before World War II (New World opened in 1923, Great World in 1931 and Happy World in 1936). Their significance cannot be discounted largely because people flocked to these clubs every night to dance **joget, ronggeng** as well as contemporary popular dance crazes such as cha-cha, rumba, tango to name a few.⁴⁰ One only needs to return to Straits Settlements Government Gazette of October 1895, 1407 No. 612, where theatrical performances included...*wayang, mayong, mundu, joget, ronggeng...*and more importantly required *a license from the Chief Police Officer of the Settlement in which such theatre is situated and shall pay the prescribed fee thereon.*⁴¹ It is highly unlikely that the *joget* and *ronggeng*, known to law-makers of the Straits settlement in 1895 and *joget* and *ronggeng* in the 1950s that Joseph Peters describes could be the same. And yet their identities between 1895 and 1950s had rendered a change from traditional to popular. Many of these traditional musics have become the purview of the Peoples Association Malay Orchestra or Orkes Melayu as it is known in other settings. Formed in 1991, Orkes Melayu is seen to fulfil a 'social and cultural' responsibility in sustaining and experimenting with Malay traditional musics via performances, workshops and lecture demonstrations. Further scholarship is most usefully pursued here in examining the nature, role and identity of Malay traditional musics, as museum curator or as contemporary commentator, confronting the Malay community in a contemporary globalised setting.

Much of these practices begin with the notion that they were extremely popular in a very distant past. Worthy of discussion is the notion of these practices as attractors for social cohesion or participation as communities. Another problem raised hinges on the notion of popularity of support and its correlation with

popularity of traditional practice. Both seem to work on differing views of cultural praxis either as museum culture or evolving, adapting culture. Chopyak makes the point in his article which looks at these musical practices as popular forms in Malaysia yet these are promoted as musics of Malay traditional culture in Singapore. Future scholarship should be able to revisit these issues, among many other issues.

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26 Interview with Mohd. Bagushair, with Larry Francis and Farid Alatas 25 April 2004.

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28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 Chopyak, op.cit., pp.121-122.

31 Harding and Sarji., p.219.

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33 Chopyak, op.cit., 124.

34 Vaughan, J.D, Notes on the Malays of Pinang and Province Wellesley, Journal of the Indian Archipelago and eastern Asia, 1857, p.135, in Chopyak, op.cit., p.138. Here is a suggestion of the influence given that quadrilles were long in practice in Singapore by that time and we are not often given information on whether these Malays, particularly those in urban areas, might be part of a band at the Governor's expenses.

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41 STRAITS SETTLEMENTS GOVERNMENT GAZETTE, OCT. 25, 1895, .1407 No. 612;-

2. *In this Ordinance "theatre" includes any theatre room booth or other place open to the public or any class of the public in theatre which there is carried on any stage-play circus conjuring dancing, wayang, mayong, mundu, joget, ronggeng or other operatic or theatrical performance of any sort whatever.*

3. *After the coming into operation of this Ordinance it shall not be lawful for any' person to open a theatre within Municipal limits or carry on a theatrical performance therein unless he shall first obtain a license from the Chief Police Officer of the Settlement in which such theatre is situated and shall pay the prescribed fee thereon.*