

BOOK REVIEW

Johan , A. (2018). *Cosmopolitan Intimacies: Malay Film Music of the Independence Era*. Singapore: National University of Singapore. 376pp. ISBN 9789814722636

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There are few academic works on Malaysia that explore the diverse influences of Malay cosmopolitanism on postcolonial nation-making. Fewer still, if any, locate these intersections in 1950s and 1960s Malay film music. Adil Johan's *Cosmopolitan Intimacies* is one such exception where an ethnomusicological investigation uncovers a transitional and fluid cosmopolitan Malay nationalism within film music of the Malay Peninsula. Focusing primarily on P. Ramlee's cinematic oeuvre and secondarily on Zubir Said's compositions, the book draws on historical and socio-political developments to construct the narrative of a specific cosmopolitan Malayness that has prevailed as 'traditional' and, in its presumed authenticity, was subsequently anointed as 'national culture'. While much has been written about Malay identity, the cultural reification of this specific post-independence Malay modernity within P. Ramlee's film music has largely been overlooked. By way of addressing this lacuna, the discussions tangentially suggest several new perspectives to our understanding of prevailing constitutive meanings of Malayness.

Cosmopolitan Intimacies' five analytical chapters (out of a total of seven) each provides a thematic discussion that relates to one aspect of 'intimate cosmopolitanism' within the process of nation-making. Briefly establishing the milieu of 1950s Malay studio films and the significance of this 'golden era' of Malay filmmaking, the first chapter locates the films and music of P. Ramlee – the iconic Malay director, actor, singer, and composer – at the centre of the commonly-perceived markers of Malaysian (and to a lesser extent, Singaporean) national cultural identity. We are briefly introduced to the concept of 'cosmopolitanism' and 'cultural intimacies' and it is suggested that P. Ramlee's "films and music projected the aspirational sentiments of postcolonial nationhood alongside the social anxieties of rapid urbanisation and modernisation" (p. 5). These provide the impetus for the author's positioning of P. Ramlee as a 'cosmopolitan artist', which opens up the space in subsequent chapters for discussions about the historical, cultural, and musicological influences in P. Ramlee's film music.

The second chapter introduces two films by P. Ramlee, *Hang Tuah* (1956) and *Sergeant Hassan* (1958), and proceeds to establish the similarities and differences between the deployment of 'nationhood' and 'decolonisation' through one key music score in each film. The varying sentiments about decolonisation are contrasted through different projections of nation-making that focus on the notion of 'traditional' (epic set in precolonial times) in *Hang Tuah*, and 'modern' (Second World War film) in *Sergeant Hassan*. It is observed that the musical motifs in *Hang Tuah* "amplify a sentiment of

resistance” that embodied the “anxieties of decolonisation” while Sergeant Hassan’s reflected the nation’s submissive “wait” for its “fully realised autonomy” (independence) (p. 90). The differences between Sergeant Hassan’s positive portrayal of colonial rule and Hang Tuah’s representation of precolonial Malay history and feudal excess as justification for European anti-colonialism, are demonstrated as being widely divergent in their embedded “sentiments of self-determination” in an independent Malay nation (p. 91).

The third chapter extends the discussion laterally to Singaporean Malay film composer Zubir Said and considers the ‘cosmopolitan’ or ‘urban’ influences that informed the composition of several key musical scores, one of which was the national anthem of Singapore. Here, the emphasis is on uncovering the dissonance between the overtly anti-colonial narratives of the late 1950s and early 1960s and the “musical nationalist ideologies of composers like Zubir Said who were inspired by the possibilities of an emerging Malay nation beyond colonial rule” (p. 92). It is suggested that the ‘non-traditional’ influences that are part of our prevailing understandings of Malayness can be attributed to the creative agencies of individuals like Zubir Said. Referencing Zubir Said’s music in the film *Dang Anom* (1962), the chapter establishes the film’s “traditionalised aesthetic representation of Malay music as a way of articulating an aspiring ethnonationalist and anti-colonial sentiment” (p. 39). Of interest is the assertion that Zubir Said’s “traditionalist and Malay nationalist music aesthetic” is interacting with Hussein Haniff’s “anti-feudalist interpretation of precolonial Malay society” (p. 39). It is proposed that Zubir Said’s music demonstrates how a “postcolonial nation is imagined through the evocation of tradition” (p. 130), though noting that traditions themselves are ‘unauthentic’ in the sense that they are reimagined or created to be a constitutive part of nationhood. In this sense, it is suggested that Zubir Said’s film music was central to the creation of a Malay musical tradition for the newly emerging nation.

The fourth chapter discusses the dynamics of social class by comparing the musical articulations and the mediation of modernity in the films, *Antara Dua Darjat* (1960) and *Ibu Mertua-ku* (1962). Exemplifying the rise of “social films (filem masyarakat)” (p. 138, translation in original), both these cinematic productions address issues of class inequality within a Malay Peninsula that, at the time, was becoming increasingly urbanised. Situating the narratives within the politics of modernity that was emerging out of a milieu of generational cultural anxiety, the chapter simultaneously draws attention to the films’ staging of this contestation against issues of Malay inter-class dynamics, an autocracy-self-determination binary, and other such communal social fissures.

Perhaps the most robust chapter in the book, the fifth chapter contrasts the contributions of Zubir Said’s musical oeuvre with that of P. Ramlee’s toward the crystallisation of ‘national culturalism’ amongst the youth during the period of Malay pop yeh yeh youth music. Among other reasons, pop yeh yeh’s ‘Western’ influences meant that it was perceived as a subversive subculture or counterculture to the dominant conservative conceptions of the nation’s ruling elite. This provides the backdrop for the book’s assertion of “contestation between the state and youth cultural practices” (p. 223) which led to legislative interventions that sought to limit or repress this transgressive ‘moral-cultural threat’ of urbanised Malay youths. The film, *A Go Go*

'67 (1967), is suggested as being a clear encapsulation of these different developments where the film narrated a youth's perspective on music and reactions to the moral policing of youths. Conversely, these developments were reimagined as a more benign narrative of human ageing in the film *Muda Mudi* (1965). Of notable interest is the notion of 'youth' that is positioned as a historical marker for the contestation between the old and the new. Within the context of the film industry of the time, it became representative of a progressive decline of interest in P. Ramlee's films, and other similar films, when faced with an increasingly youthful demographic.

The sixth chapter centres on three cases that exemplify the various ways that independence-era Malay film music has been adapted to more "contemporary contexts that simultaneously perpetuate and contest a 'cultural regime' of Malay national identity" (p. 228). One such adaptation that the book centres on is the appropriation of Zubir Said's and P. Ramlee's Malay film music aesthetics by state-defined national culture. Framed through the discussion of nostalgia, this chapter provides an ethnography of how these icons and their compositions are "remembered, historicised and canonised through emotional narratives" (p. 40). The chapter subsequently suggests that these interpretations by contemporary Malaysian musicians are paradoxical, for they are premised on subversions of a "homogeneous national music culture while perpetuating a commodified nostalgia towards the past" (p. 40). With this affective discourse, the book observes that the state's attempts to rearticulate these music icons and their music are pervasive to political, social, and musical nostalgia of Singapore and Malaysia. In this way, the symbiotic relationship between national culturalism and nostalgia is established.

Cosmopolitan Intimacies is deftly written, and arguments are posited fluidly. There is, across the chapters, a recurring notion that influences determining 'tradition' are diverse and constantly evolve, even when the great paradox of national culture formulation lies in the rigid codification of practices and sentiments that produce a fixity which inoculates nationalist cultural ideas from any evolution in subsequent years. Similarly present is the attendant argument that, to a degree, Malayness has always included influences that are 'cosmopolitan', which brings into sharper relief the irony in any assertion of 'authenticity' to 'traditional' Malayness. There were, however, instances where I was left wondering if it would have been productive to further define several of the terms or ideas that form the basis for a few of the book's central contentions. Modernity, or more specific to the book's definition of cosmopolitan – "distinguished as articulating two or more contrasting identities simultaneously" (p. 9) – is, in my reading, somewhat of a generic term, especially when this definition veers towards broad understandings of hybridity or cultural plurality. Since the book does not, in my view, go into great detail about the specificities of any particular 'identity', there is a degree of vagueness to the alluded 'intimacies' of this cosmopolitanism. The concept of Malay indigeneity, what it constitutes, and the tangential question of what Malayness is, are areas of much contention among Malay studies scholars. It would be useful if the contexts of use for these terms – Malayness, Malay identity, and indigenous Malay – were therefore defined. The key notion of 'Malay tradition' also remains relatively vague. Does it refer to adat, religion, labour divisions, performing art genres, or all of these at once?

I would also be interested to know if some of the observations about historical developments were derived from personal notes of the individuals involved, referenced from other scholarly studies, or inferred by the author. We are told, for example, that Javanese language was employed in the film *Ali Baba Bujang Lapok* (1961) to confound the British censors of the time (p. 3). The source for this insight is not revealed, nor are any examples or events provided in support of that conclusion. By the 1950s in Malaya, there were large numbers of Malays of Indonesian parentage, many of who were Javanese. With this domiciled community, it would be insightful to know if the British administration did not induct any Javanese speaking individuals into segments of the Malayan civil service, and the censorship department specifically, as they had the Peninsula Malays.

One (of many) interesting notion is that Malaysians are unable to escape the memory of P. Ramlee due to a “culturally potent sentiment of pity” that has been sutured through “structural nostalgia” to the period of independence which consequently provides a sense of “nationalist ‘pride’” (p. 28-29). I do wonder if the alluded mnemonic trigger is highly contingent on viewer subjectivities. A case in point is the book’s assertion of his “tragic kasihan narrative” (p. 29) which was arguably popularly known only after History Channel’s telecast of its P. Ramlee documentary in 2010. Some comparatively more ‘lay appreciation’ for his films have previously been known to centre on its encouragement and portrayal of harmonious co-existence between the races that were later reflected in much of the nation-building initiatives of the 1970s and 1980s. While these do align with the book’s assertion of ‘national pride’ and ‘nostalgia’ for a post-colonial nation-making, they are premised on entirely different sentiments. This wide variance in opinions about the utility and value of P. Ramlee’s films suggests that viewer interpretation is highly subjective and not homogenous, even across an intra-communal viewership.

Cosmopolitan Intimacies fundamentally poses questions about authorial power and, at the very least, prompts a reassessment of claims to ‘traditional’ Malay cultural authenticity. It is therefore interesting that there are traces of the author’s own authorial liberties in his production of a narrative about this historical post-colonial nation-making. Historical or ethnographical studies that incorporate a reflexive component (p. 14) possess the inherent difficulty of ensuring that the reading of events and processes are not an interpretation imagined through the scholar’s own subjectivities but – in the context of this book – of what was intended by content producers, or interpreted by consumers of these commercial mass media products several decades ago. I am, in this sense, making a distinction between studies of authorial ‘intent’ and of the textual ‘content’. I wonder if an objective reading of the ‘content’ is at all possible if there is foreknowledge of a reimagined ‘intent’, which is a factor that viewers of sixty years ago were not privy to. In a similar way, the additional element of authorial reflexivity further problematises the analysis. These can consequently function to symbiotically predetermine the meaning/s of, what in fact are, inherently polysemous meanings in films.

There is no doubt that *Cosmopolitan Intimacies* is indeed a significant work. The book’s contribution to its field of knowledge is distinct, where it convincingly argues against the too common view that ‘traditional’ Malay culture is non-cosmopolitan, among other such misconceptions. The analysis is insightful and aids in deepening our

understanding of a significantly complex period of post-independent Malaysia. Most notably, by design or otherwise, by demonstrating the ambivalent nature of nationalist identity formation through film music, this novel exploration foregrounds the highly contested nature of 'traditional' or 'pure' (jati) Malayness and emphasises the need for a critical rethinking of how Malaysians imagine communal tradition, identity, and culture. Some of the assertions put forth in *Cosmopolitan Intimacies* must, however, be engaged with and pushed further. This review attempts to make a small contribution to that ongoing effort.

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