

MALAYSIAN MUSIC AND SOCIAL COHESION: CONTEMPORARY RESPONSES TO POPULAR PATRIOTIC SONGS FROM THE 1950s – 1990s

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Abstract

Upon its independence in 1957, Malaysia was in the process of becoming a modern nation and therefore required modern totems to bind together its diverse population. Malaysia's postcolonial plural society would be brought under the imagined 'nation-of-intent' of the government of the day (Shamsul A. B., 2001). Music in the form of the national anthem and patriotic songs were and remained essential components of these totems; mobilised by the state to foster a sense of national cohesion and collective identity. These songs are popular and accepted by Malaysian citizens from diverse backgrounds as a part of their national identity, and such affinities are supported by the songs' repeated broadcast and consumption on national radio, television and social media platforms. For this study, several focus group discussions (FGD) were conducted in Kuching, Kota Kinabalu and the Klang Valley. This research intends to observe and analyse whether selected popular patriotic songs in Malaysia, composed and written between the 1960s to 2000 could promote and harness a sense of collective identity and belonging amongst Malaysians. There exists an evident lacuna in the study of the responses and attitudes of Malaysians, specifically as music listeners and consumers of popular patriotic songs. The study finds that unlike initially hypothesised, patriotic songs – instead of commercial popular songs – are more popular and wide-reaching in appeal across different professions, ethnicities, religions and geographic locations of Malaysians. Patriotic music provides a means for social cohesion, not via the propagation of dogmatic patriotic content, but through the personal, intimate and affective associations that such songs solicit from individual citizens.

Keywords: Malaysia, patriotic songs, popular music, social cohesion, focus groups, affect

Introduction and Background

Patriotic music began flourishing as early as the 1930s and continued intensifying in frequency, especially at the dawn of Malaysia's independence in 1957 (Shazlin A. Hamzah, 2016, 2019). This was a trend that continued with such ardour from the 1950s throughout the 1970s from the effort of both the government of the day as well as people from the grassroots. Indeed, an important example of a patriotic song that pioneered this genre was the national anthem *Negaraku*. The melody of *Negaraku* has a complex history of circulation that can be traced to the Pangkor Treaty in 1874, the consequent exile of Raja Abdullah to Seychelles Island, followed by the visit by Raja Idris to Buckingham Palace at the invitation of Queen Victoria in 1888. This melody or song would spread across the Malay Archipelago through its performance in various *Bangsawan* operas until finally, at the instruction of Tunku Abdul Rahman, it was arranged as the national anthem for the Federation of Malaya in 1957 (Shazlin A. Hamzah, 2016, 2018; Tan Sooi Beng, 1993). Much like flags, patriotic songs are consciously used to shape an image of the nation; thus representing and disseminating the country's image of a particular 'nation-of-intent' amidst its diverse ethnic, religious and ideological communities (Shamsul A. B., 1996a, 1996b, 2009).

These songs become popular by sheer virtue of being broadcast with tremendous frequency, initially through national radio (*Radio Malaya*) and by the 1970s, television (*Radio Televisyen Malaysia*) and today through social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter. Despite being labelled as potentially banal (Billig, 1995), these songs are symbols that can have a profound impact on millions of people in the country. When combined with sentiments of nationalism, which embody the meaning of a nation, these songs can inspire and resonate with every individual in a community/nation – not unlike a religious movement. The unified singing of national anthems, during sporting events, for example, is termed as 'unisonance' (Anderson, 1983; Bohlman, 2011) which results in an emotionally overwhelming feeling of collective cohesion. Notably, the chorus of a national song has the capacity to serve as a simulacrum for the nation and this is particularly powerful as it positions the nation on a pedestal in the collective imagination of citizens.

In this paper, we explain the varying affective associations brought about by the dissemination of a national image through particular popular songs and note the existence of a proliferation of various ideological and personal understandings of what that 'nation' is, specifically within the context of Malaysia as a post-colonial state (Shamsul A. B., 2007; Shamsul A. B. & Daud, 2012). Secondly, we present corroborative findings from focus group discussions

conducted in Kuching, Kota Kinabalu and Klang Valley that reveal everyday-defined (Shamsul A. B., 1996a, 2009, 2012) interpretations of patriotic music from the grassroots of the country. The study finds that unlike initially hypothesised, patriotic songs – instead of commercial popular songs – were more popular and wide-reaching in appeal across different professions, ethnicities, religions and geographic locations of Malaysians. However, this is complicated by the fact that patriotic songs are also ‘popular’ in format and modes of dissemination to the public, and individual Malaysians derive a combination of personal affectations as well as collective experiences from such songs.

At the dawn of independence for the Federation of Malaya in 1957, local composers were actively writing patriotic-themed songs as evidenced in numerous appearances of such tunes in commercial films and recordings made through *Radio Malaya* (Shazlin A. Hamzah, 2016, 2018). Although some were specifically commissioned by the government, there were also many that were composed by local artists who felt the need to proclaim their love for the independent state (Mohammad Hashim, personal communication, July 23, 2014). Many of these compositions remain important and aired until today. It is useful to note that the events that resulted in the independence of the country were predominantly led by the Malays and Malay elites. Therefore, it is no surprise that these songs were infused with Malay centric symbols and texts (Shazlin A. Hamzah, 2016). Notwithstanding this, such songs serve as a means for encouraging social cohesion in the country. This was achieved through the songs’ dissemination to the public via government-controlled mass media and the singing of such songs amongst students in government-run schools.

Nevertheless, the extent of social cohesion and loyalty of Malaysians to the authority-defined state is always challenged by globalisation, industrialisation and Malaysians themselves who embrace complex identities that are not necessarily tied to the nation-state. Popular music provides many channels for the consumption and expression of non-nationalist identities. Such identities might be localised expressions, but at the same time may also be responsive to global trends in popular music such as hip-hop and rock (Pillai, 2013). However, mass-mediated markets of music are also intrinsically tied to the unequal power dynamics inherent in global capitalism (Stokes, 2004).

Music then, is a particularly malleable instrument for shaping a nation’s image. Music, along with its associated icons and modes of dissemination such as artists, bands, performance spaces, broadcast technologies can be instrumentalised by authoritative structures or agents to promote a particular understanding or ideology of national identity. Conversely, music is also a cultural product that is consumed *en masse* and is distributed for such

consumption via technologies of reproduction and distribution for a monetised and/or nationalised public sphere. However, the experience of listening to music can also be a personal and intimate activity. Therefore, regardless of a song's initial political or commercial intent, it may resonate with different emotional and sentimental meanings amongst individual or collective groups of listeners.

To that end, we are particularly concerned with how popular music and patriotic music have been received over time by Malaysian citizens who are consumers of music. Does the popular music consumed by Malaysians reflect a shared sonic and narrative space for national cohesion amidst cultural and geographical differences? And, in line with the question posed in our preliminary paper for this project, we consider "the current impact of patriotic pop songs disseminated by the Malaysian government media since the 1970s" and ask if "commercially-produced popular songs" are "more or less effective" – more so, *affective* – "than such patriotic songs in fostering a sense of national affinity?" (Adil Johan & Shazlin A. Hamzah, 2019, p. 174)

To answer these questions, this article draws data from a larger research project that conducted focus group discussions on popular music in three urban geographical locations in Malaysia to garner a wide representation of responses, them being 1) Kuching; 2) Kota Kinabalu; and 3) Klang Valley. The study is notably limited in its representation of urban areas and select locations, and this was due to the budget constraints and scope of the project. However, while the project was not comprehensive in its sampling of informants, the study emphasised a wide reach of Malaysians in urban areas, emphasising the need to consider the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak that are often neglected in many studies on Malaysia. The Klang Valley is also a useful site for gathering data, as many of its inhabitants have immigrated from other locations across the country. It is hoped that this preliminary study may be expanded to be more inclusive of other locations – especially rural locations – in future studies.

Literature Review

Nations possess national and patriotic music, regardless of the conscious awareness of their artists, musicians or citizens. National and patriotic music usually express richly layered meanings and evocative metaphors, thus providing an ideal archetype for other forms of music produced within the national context. The malleable qualities of songs render them perfect instruments for shaping a nation's image and by extension, its national identity (Bohlman, 2011). National ceremonies and flags are often employed to celebrate, recognise, promote, (re)create and (re)enforce identities (Elgenius, 2011; Eriksen, 2007) and music, on the other hand, projects sonic symbols with the capacity to

enhance the importance of a nation amongst its citizens. National and patriotic music are also known to acquire their aesthetic and sonic characteristics from the aesthetic and lyrical ways in which they narrate a nation's history (Bohlman, 2011). The intangible aspects of a nation such as symbols, emotions, ethnicities are thus represented with efficacy through national songs or music that express patriotic sentiments. Thus, in the context of a multicultural and multi-ethnic Malaysia, considerable resources have been invested by the government to canonise particular forms of suitable music that could serve as a platform for national integration (Shazlin A. Hamzah, 2016; 2018; 2019).

The concept of Malaysia as a nation, however, must be understood as a complex of meanings alongside its historical and social context of inception. Epistemologically, for post-colonial states, terms such as states, nations and nation-states are completely dissimilar and cannot be used interchangeably. This is because the experience of decolonisation among independent former colonies are different compared to that of Europe; whence the idea of 'nation' originated. Due to the varying historical trajectories of these countries, we cannot assume that the term 'state' is akin to 'nation'. The conceptual definition of the 'state' is an entity that has the rule of law, territory and citizenship (Shamsul A. B., 2007; Shamsul & Daud, 2012). For postcolonial countries, the 'state' is separated from the 'nation', the latter being defined as an imagined community that is comprised of diverging 'nations-of-intent' that represent the ethnic, religious and ideological aspiration of different communities that converge upon the same national space (Shamsul A. B., 1996b).

The multifarious nations-of-intent for Malaysia have, thus, emerged from a historical context of anti-colonialism from the pre- to post-colonial era. The idea of advancing alternative nations-of-intent other than that of the authority-defined one (as outlined by the constitution) has found concrete expressions that seek to demand a political space and voice. The Islamic PAS led the state of Kelantan for example, demonstrates a particular nation-of-intent that was opposing UMNO-Barisan National rule (Shamsul A. B., 1996b), which also challenged the Pakatan Harapan government from 2018 until early 2020. That Malaysia is also a two-tier federation consisting of formerly independent states of Sabah and Sarawak also demonstrates how diverse conceptions of a nation may be formed within a shared national space (Shamsul A. B., 2007). This is complicated by the fact that the cultural (and religious) characteristics of *bumiputera* identity (lit. 'sons of the soil', for those that claim Malay ethnicity or from ethnic groups recognised as indigenous to Malaysia) are different between West and East Malaysia (Shamsul A. B., 2001). Therefore, this study considers how such complex formulations of national identity in Malaysia may be read

against the responses of focus group members – who have a varied sense and experience of nationalism – to songs that attempt to overlook or reconcile such differences amongst Malaysians.

Aside from theories about nationalism, this study also draws attention to the affective or intimate sentiments and interactions that occur amongst Malaysians in their daily experiences and associations with popular music. Expanding on conceptual work on cosmopolitan intimacy and nation-making in popular film music (Adil, 2018), this paper contributes to studies on music that employ Herzfeld's (2016) theory about cultural intimacy to explain the unique ethnographical aspects of a particular community or national space (Stokes 2010; Stirr, 2017). In line with these existing studies that observe the bridging of cultural, ethnic, religious and political differences through music, we consider how intimate associations with popular music cut across diverging nations-of-intents within Malaysia?

Cultural intimacies in popular music also contribute significantly to the "social flourishing" of select communities and societies (Hesmondhalgh, 2013). There are a significant amount of studies on Malaysian popular music from the 1960s to 2000s (Chopyak, 1986, 1987; Lockard, 1991, 1995, 1996, 1998; Boyle, 2013; Barendregt, 2014; Zawawi, 2016; Weintraub & Barendregt, 2017; Barendregt, Keppy, & Nordholt, 2017). However, these publications do not directly explain how such music provides an *affective* means for encouraging social cohesion amongst Malaysians, nor do they provide clear insights on how apparent divisions in Malaysian society might be addressed. We suggest here that patriotic songs may provide the means for such cohesion, but not necessarily in the dogmatic or 'top-down' manner with which they are commonly associated. Our study of focus groups reveals that personal and intimate associations with such songs abound and these are the qualities that truly contribute to such songs' affective potency.

Methodology

Between March and April 2019, a total of 12 focus group discussions (FGDs) were carried out in Kuching, Kota Kinabalu and the Klang Valley. The study interviewed 81 informants about their everyday experiences and preferences in consuming popular music. The informants were divided into four demographic groups in each location: 1) Youths (ages 19 to 39); 2) Business Owners or Entrepreneurs (any age); 3) Professionals (any age); 4) Arts Practitioners and Musicians (see Table 1). These groups were also demographically multi-ethnic as the study is interested in seeing how members respond in multi-ethnic contexts. Focus groups conducted varied in size from as large as ten members to as small

as four members. Circumstances beyond the control of the participants and researchers contributed to such discrepancies. Such are the challenges of organising focus groups in reliance of external contacts to secure group members. However, focus groups conducted in the Klang Valley, with closer management by the project team had considerably higher attendance. The larger project explored issues about national identity and popular music, and the different ways that Malaysians consumed such music. This paper draws on the “Listening Session” of the focus group interviews, which presented group members with 16 shortened song samples of Malaysian popular and patriotic songs, curated by the project researchers. The findings for this paper are drawn from Section B of the Listening Session that features six patriotic songs (Table 2).

Group members were played samples from the tracklist. Upon listening to a song sample, the group was polled on whether they “recognised” the song; then the group was asked if they “liked” the song. Following that a more detailed discussion on the reasons behind the group members’ responses was recorded by the focus group moderators. Questions such as “why do you like this song” and “please explain why you do not like this song” were asked to solicit detailed and personal responses from group members.

Table 1: Breakdown of FGD Informants by Demographic Groups

Focus Groups	Kuching	Kota Kinabalu	Klang Valley	Total
1. Youths	6	7	8	21
2. Business/Entrepreneurs	4	7	8	19
3. Professionals	6	5	10	21
4. Arts and Music	6	5	9	20
TOTAL				81

Table 2: Song List for Listening Session (Patriotic Song Set List)

No.	Song	Composer	Performer	Lyrics	Year
B1	<i>Tanah Pusaka</i>	Ahmad Merican	Bing Slamet	Wan Ahmad Kamal	1964
B2	<i>31 Ogos (Tanggal 31)</i>	Ahmad C.B.	Sudirman Arshad	Ahmad C.B.	1957
B3	<i>Sejahtera Malaysia</i>	Mohamed Rahmat	Fauziah Ahmad Daud, Rohana Jalil, Elaine Kang, Azlina Aziz.	Mohamed Rahmat	1990

B4	<i>Setia</i>	Ahmad Dassilah Mohd Yusoff	Francissca Peter	Mohamed Rahmat	1987
B5	Standing in the Eyes of the World	David Gates & Wah Idris	Nor Zila Aminuddin (Ella)	Habsah Hassan	1998
B6	<i>Perajurit Tanahair</i>	Saiful Bahri	Jamaluddin Alias	Saiful Bahri	1960

Findings

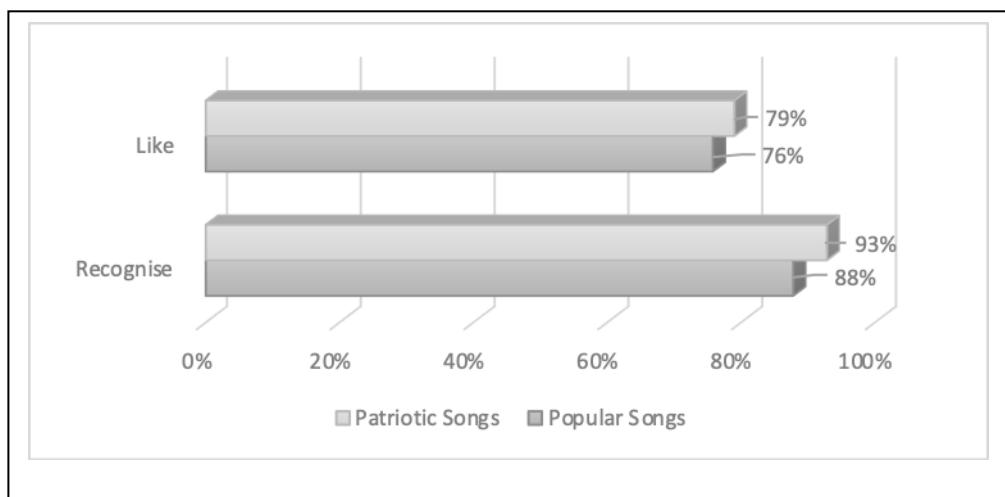


Figure 1: Comparative Percentage of Likability and Recognisability of Patriotic Songs and Popular Songs

In considering the results of polls and responses to patriotic songs, the paper will focus solely on this aspect of the study. Elsewhere, we have published more details on the study and presented preliminary findings regarding focus group members' responses to Malaysian popular songs as well as their music consumption habits (Adil Johan & Shazlin A. Hamzah, 2019). Overall, from all the polls conducted on recognisability of songs during the listening sessions, patriotic songs were the most recognised at 98% in comparison to popular songs at 88% (Figure 1). Further, 79% of patriotic songs were liked in comparison to 76% of popular songs. These numbers suggest that patriotic songs are, interestingly, more 'popular' than Malaysian pop songs, both in recognisability and likeability. This finding refutes the researchers' hypothesis at the start of the project. There might be other variables that have affected this outcome, however,

as there were less patriotic songs and popular songs in the listening session due to time constraints for conducting the focus group discussions.

As illustrated in Figure 2, “31 Ogos” (B2) was polled as the most liked and recognised patriotic song, while “Standing in the Eyes of the World” (B5) was the third most liked and recognised song from the list. The latter song is highlighted as it pertains to some important responses by group members, explored later in this article. Unlike other songs in the list, these songs are also commercially-produced popular songs that carry a patriotic message or theme. Thus, they may be considered ‘hybrid’ patriotic-commercial songs. Unlike these commercial-patriotic songs, the second most popular patriotic song, “Sejahtera Malaysia” (B3), was composed by the then Minister of Information Mohamed Rahmat for a political campaign called SEMARAK (abbreviation for *Setia Bersama Rakyat* (Sia, 2009) and produced for nationwide-broadcast by Radio Televisyen Malaysia (RTM). Similar to these government-commissioned songs are “Setia” (B4), “Tanah Pusaka” (B1) and “Perajurit Tanah Air” (B6), which were written and commissioned as nationalistic propaganda songs, produced and broadcasted by RTM.

Not all the government-commissioned songs were liked despite most of them being recognised fairly well. The songs “Setia” (B4) and “Perajurit Tanah Air” (B6) are examples of this instance. While the earlier song “Setia” was well recognised at 90%, it was not liked as much (68%). The latter song on the other hand, was both well recognised (98%) and appreciated (94%) by members of the focus group discussions.

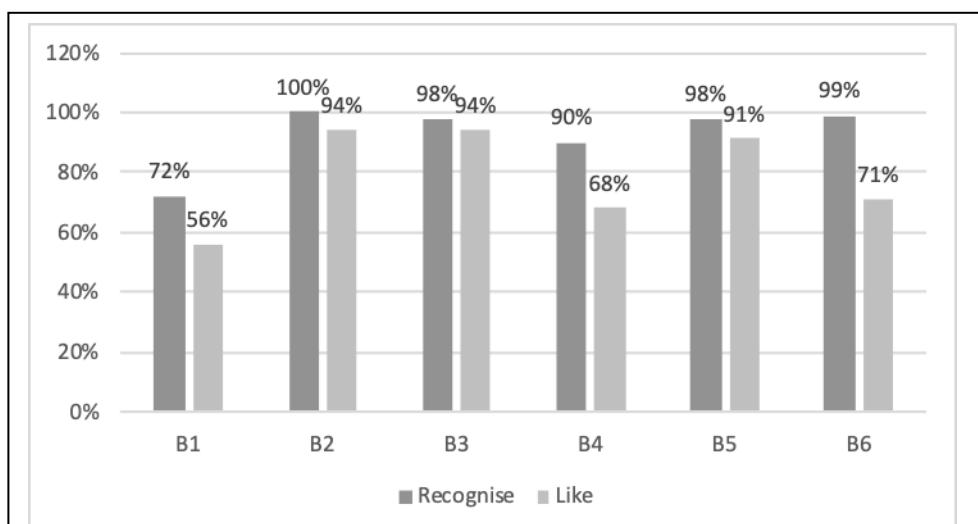


Figure 2: Percentage of Patriotic Songs Recognised and Liked by Informants

A total of 6 patriotic songs from the 1960s through 1990s were played at the end of the listening section and informants were asked questions as described in the previous section. Table 4 lists select responses from this section of the FGD. For this paper, responses are drawn from members of three (out of twelve) focus groups conducted across Malaysia: 1) Kuching Entrepreneurs (KE); 2) Kota Kinabalu Professionals (KKP) and 3) Klang Valley Professionals (KVP). Individual informants cited are marked by numbered codes (e.g. KE3, KKP5, KVP1).

Discussion

This section will draw on FGD group members responses to a few prominent patriotic songs that were played during the Listening Session. We focus on the songs "Sejahtera Malaysia" (B3), "Setia" (B4), "Perajurit Tanahair" (B6) and "31 Ogos" (B1). The focus group discussions also showed how lyrics of songs mattered to listeners. Most of the members found that the lyrics to "Sejahtera Malaysia" (B3) were more inclusive and that they reflected messages of multi-ethnic diversity. "Setia", on the other hand, conveyed notes of loyalty to leading figures and institutions of authority. Among the comments made by the FGD members about how propagandistic "Setia" is are as follows:

You know, it's quite interesting, I heard an interview once about.... I can't remember... was it the composer of this song... he was part of the team that was working on... unity songs...and (it was tied) to May (13th)... the (1969) riots... it just resonated to me that *wah*, this was somewhat propaganda in trying to get people... I mean, for the next generation not to (not express dissent)... but I don't know. (KVP 8)

As this member is hinting that these are propagandistic songs with an express aim to subdue dissent among the younger generation, another member of the same group added her reflection on the explicit aspects of the song's lyrics:

I'm just really struck, I never really thought about the lyrics before a lot (such as the line) '*kepada pemimpin* (to the leaders)', '*kepada rakyat* (to the people)'. Those two words are... very strong, especially when... you're a kid (and) you don't care. (KVP 2)

Thus, such songs have had an impact on subliminally inculcating children that 'don't care' from an early age to submit loyalty (*kesetiaan*) to their political leaders, while having a sense of collective identity as citizens. In

addition, most prominently, for most focus groups conducted across Malaysia, members relate these two songs to their schooling days:

Ni lagu masa orang sekolah ni

[This is a song from my schooling years] (KER 5)

It just reminds me of like school choir and everybody wears that same batik baju and then sing on the stage. (KVP 6)

It reminds me of school, standing under the hot sun, singing this. (KVP 4)

Some of the members from the groups cited above had neutral and somewhat negative memories of these official patriotic songs, and such memories were related to government-school activities that had KVP 4 ‘standing under the hot sun’ while singing these songs. However, there were also positive associations related to these songs and songs of similar styles from the 1990s:

Saya suka semua versi lagu ni. Tapi saya paling suka yang versi Francissa Peter punya. Version dia. Masa zaman ni, tak silap ada pertandingan lagu-lagu patriotik tau. Yang semua lagu sedap. Ada beberapa lagulah.

I love all the versions of this song. But the one I love most is one sang by Francissca Peters. During this era, if I am not mistaken, there was a competition for patriotic songs. There were quite a number of them and all those songs were nice. (KER 2)

KER 2, highlights the multiple versions of this song that have been produced and broadcasted over the years and this indicates that the 1990s was a period when many memorable patriotic-themed songs were broadcasted on radio and television. There were also members who may not have liked the song personally but associated it with a positive memory, such as expressed by a Klang Valley member who recalled listening to “Sejahtera Malaysia” with his family:

So it took me back to a time where it was just... me, my mum and my sister and my mum and my sister could sing this song, so they had a good time, while singing this song, so I was like OK, it was a good time in the house. They were belting (it)... they enjoyed this (song). (KVP 9)

“Perajurit Tanahair” (B6) was the second most recognised song (99%) yet not particularly liked (71%). Men were more inclined to comment about this military-like song as they spoke of notions of pride and associated it with the Malaysian army. Women were markedly seen as less likely to appreciate the song. In jest, a male member commented on the chauvinistic notes of the song:

Siapa tak tahu kita tembak je. Tembak dia (semua ketawa). Siapa yang belum lahir masa dekat Sabah jala kan. Dulu masa dengan adik main-main senapang. Tahu tak guna penyaru jak.

[Those who don't know this song should be shot. Shoot them (everyone laughs). Perhaps to those who were not born yet then. During those days I was playing rifles with my siblings, well we were only using brooms.] (KE 1)

The utility of the song to incite patriotism for military excursions was especially relevant in Kota Kinabalu, which had seen frequent border disputes and terrorist activity. This was related as such in relation to the song:

Lagu tentera ini yang bersemangat, pernah dengar, lagu ini banyak maksud ni, berbeza rentak dengan Standing in The Eyes tadi, motivasi juga lagu ini, melambangkan bersatu, macam dulu kes Lahad Datu , lagu ni guna la bagi naik semangat tentera waktu itu.

[This is a military song that gives you so much courage. It has so much meanings. It is different compared to Standing in the Eyes we heard previously. This is also a song that... (is motivational for) us, a call for us to unite. Like the case in Lahad Datu, this was the song that gave the military their might then.] (KKP5)

Members in the Peninsular, however, expressed some differing views about the song. One member did not like the musical aesthetic of the song but resonated profoundly with its lyrics:

I think it's purely because of the lyrics. If you ask me about the melody and all that, no way... I think there are some things that are mentioned in the lyrics... about, if I don't come back would you put a flower on my tombstone. (KVP1)

Another member, reflected on the historical narrative of struggle that was represented in the song and found it had a ‘depth’ of meaning and was also ‘quite haunting... to a certain extent’ (KVP 9). However, while such views were reflective and interpretive, the song also did conjure specific memories, or at least the recollections of relatives involved in the *Konfrontasi* war of the 1960s:

It reminds me of my uncle when he joined the army and (he used to tell us) about his friends dying... when you hear this song it's like, oh, so sad... so many people died, so many of his friends died. (KVP 6)

But the historical context of the song was also extended into further reflection, as expressed by a female member who liked the song for its ‘grainy quality’, ‘crackle’ and ‘feeling of age’ that felt ‘removed’ and ‘not related to whatever our (present) lives are going through’ (KVP 2). She elaborated the following:

One thing I went through with my students, my students who are in undergraduate studies now. None of them (for example,) remember 9/11, and I think it's interesting that for our generation perhaps we (also) don't remember... (what) led up to... (our independence) and so we've lived through a lifetime of relative peace, when none of us had to go through the actual danger of literally fighting for our country. (KVP 2)

Thus, while the historical context of the song was not particularly clear for all the focus group members, the group member demonstrates how the song’s militaristic message (“fighting for our country”) is clearly expressed and recognised by group members. It is therefore the lyrical and aesthetic qualities of the song that immediately conjures a sentiment of patriotism, whether personalised or projected. However, the lyrical content as well as the retrospective listening of the song as something antiquated and ‘removed’ from the present has the potential to solicit deeper reflection about the narratives of conflict, struggle and hardship that form a historical image of a nation.

Interestingly, all of the focus group discussion members recognised Sudirman Hj. Arshad’s songs (100%). “31 Ogos” (B2), which was originally “Tanggal 31” was written in 1957 by Ahmad C. B. but popularised in the 1980s by Sudirman. Until today, this has to be the song that is repeated endlessly through the mass media especially during the country’s Merdeka (Independence Day) festivities. It can be said that this has contributed to the reason why the song is both well recognised and liked in the polls. Focus group members across

Malaysia recognised this song immediately, associating it with Merdeka Day parades held in their hometowns or broadcast on national television:

Dengar aja sudah rasa di Dataran Merdeka. Ramai orang berbaris (semua ketawa). Imagine dah pakai baju Malaysia. Dengan topi yang besar. Elok tersusun macam-macam topi.

It sure feels like I am already on Dataran Merdeka just listening to this song. I'm already imagining wearing the national costume with hats. There would be various hats all lined up. (KE 1)

Lagu ini paling popular ini, kalau hari kebangsaan, anak-anak di sekolah nyanyi ini waktu perhimpunan macam tu. semua lagu Sudirman ini banyak meaningful la bagi saya.

This is the most popular song especially for the national day. Children in school also sing this song during their gatherings. All Sudirman songs are very meaningful to me. (KKP 1)

Reminds me of Merdeka Day and then there's that parade that you do. It reminds me of that. (KVP 6)

Thus, this song conjures positive images and memories of the festivities associated with Merdeka Day in Malaysia. And, this is especially 'meaningful' because the responses above are from residents of East Malaysia, which did not join the Federation of Malaysia until 1963. The Sudirman song specifically addresses the date of independence in the Malay Peninsula; '*Tanggal tiga puluh satu, bulan lapan, lima puluh tujuh* (the thirty first of the eighth month [year of] fifty seven)' that is 31 August 1957. However, despite the song's Peninsula Malaysia bias, it still garners positive appeal from Sabah and Sarawak Malaysians.

Klang Valley informants even suggested that "31 Ogos" was more meaningful than the national anthem, "Negaraku". Upon playing "31 Ogos" the group responded in the following manner:

KVP 3: Much better than Negaraku.

KVP 2: Much better.

KVP3: This is more of a patriotic song than Negaraku actually

KVP 8 & 9: Yeah

Members indicated that one major reason that such a song is elevated above the national anthem are the positive associations attached to it. One member said it reminded him of being on ‘holiday’ (KVP 8) and this solicited much laughter from the group, while another member noted that there was ‘always fun attached to this song’ (KVP 2). Drawing from these responses, it could be deduced that by contrast, the national anthem would often be associated with formal events such as school assemblies and official functions; mundane everyday activities in which these group members would be coerced to attend. However, the overall connections of the “31 Ogos” song with festivity coupled with an annual national celebration (and public holiday) have markedly more positive associations.

Conclusion

The study finds that unlike initially hypothesised, patriotic songs instead of commercially popular songs were actually more popular and wide-reaching in appeal across different professions, ethnicities, religions and geographic locations of Malaysians. Based on the focus group discussions (FGDs) conducted, this study finds that Malaysians generally recognise, enjoy and appreciate patriotic music produced between the 1950s to 1990s. This affinity with patriotic songs, however, can be tied to diverging reasons as some confess a familiarity with the songs from constant repetition at schools, formal events or mass media broadcasts. There were moments during the FGDs when the informants were singing (and whistling) in concert to the melodies of “31 Ogos”, “Sejahtera Malaysia”, “Setia” and “Perajurit Tanahair”. These acts indicate not just the group members’ knowledge and fondness of the songs, but also how such songs offer a common ground for moments of unity in which people felt an overwhelming sense of collective sentiments for their nation. These can be understood as *unisonality* moments seen as an effect of singing patriotic songs together despite members of the group not knowing one another (Anderson, 1983; Bohlman, 2011).

It is important to note how informants were positively in favour of these songs regardless of when they were produced whether from the 1950s or later. These responses reflect how patriotic songs are effective and affective archetypes of music that work to instil sentiments of nationalism and unity. Naturally, as tools for mass media propaganda, patriotic songs impose a top-down conception of collective identity on otherwise diverse individuals. However, the personal attachments through memories and emotional responses that Malaysians link to such songs indicate a bottom-up, everyday-defined notion of national identity.

These song-related experiences are not all necessarily positive or overtly nationalistic, which further suggests that such music provides a natural platform for social cohesion that crosses boundaries of ethnicity, religion, class and geographical locations. This ties in with the concept of the many ‘nations-of-intent’ that make Malaysia – diverging ideologies and perspectives of what and who fits into the nation are clearly indicated through the diverse responses of Malaysians to patriotic songs. However, such songs do indeed clearly demarcate the intangibility of a shared national space through affective means formed through a history of musical circulation and mediation via the institutions that promote nationalism such as public radio, television and government-run schools. Patriotic music does not provide a means for social cohesion through the propagation of dogmatic patriotic content in a top-down manner. Rather, such songs establish complex social connections through the personal, affective associations that such songs solicit from individual citizens who may have diverging ideas of their place in the Malaysian nation-state. Despite complex social differences, popular patriotic music, as experienced by citizens in everyday-life and in the public sphere, intimately situates Malaysians in the collective experience of being active members of the nation-state. In Bohlman's (2011) words, discussions of music and nationalism most often focus on the elite or the marginal; they are contentions of the casts of composers whose music are supposedly consciously representing the nation. However, if music truly does shape the nation, then it should be the sonic representation of a collective of people that combine forces to articulate the modern nation. Modernity today not only brings out the music of the few but rather the masses that sing of the nation in its most fully recognisable form. They converge in chorus, and they form communities of followers that are mobilised through singing and listening.

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