

## CULTURAL DECENTRALIZATION WITHIN A POST-COLONIAL TERRITORY: MOVEMENTS IN MALAYSIA'S MUSICAL CULTURE

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Post-Colonized Malaysia acquired an identity that signifies a monolithic 'edifice' possessing attributes of a triadic sub-national/cultural foundation. However, the label 'Malaysian' is geared to signify a compromise of the sub-national characteristics for a good faith of formulating a national mass as a collective that is culturally centralized by an integration of common behaviors and reactions of a developing post-colonized territory.

In the context of music, the attachment of the label 'Malaysian' is a questionable matter. Is there such a thing as Malaysian music? The imperial 'fathers' have left a cultural 'hole' inside this rather recent post-colonized territory, in addition to inviting a haunting (a direct symptom of this 'hole') of the preceding question, that is, the name 'Malaysian' as a cultural label and identity within the context of music. Nevertheless, the 'abandonment' of the 'fathers' who were once discriminately praised, to a certain extent, has generated a space within the local culture that still requires cultural input and 'import' in various ways from anOTHER to 'fill in' what is 'lacking' locally. This phenomenon of re-seeking the previous father/anOTHER can be seen occurring in the directions charted by the local music industry as well as the general behavioral patterns of the local guardians of culture. Arguments will be focused towards recognizing and making transparent the behavioral patterns underlying the decentering phenomenon in current local music/cultural trends.

Inter-cultural blend of musical movements is one major factor influencing the foundation directing the paths taken within local musical territory. This phenomenon can cause a synthetic crystallization of multiple musical movements under one common goal which is to 'fill in' the empty space constantly being generated within local music culture. This space or void within local culture is currently caused by the question of how and what represents Malaysian music. Most of the local popular musical products are not 'sown' from purely natural or locally-grown soil but depends on foreign/local crystallization. This crystallization is a form of cultural metamorphosis which will manifest in forms of multiple hybrids such as the Malaysian-jazz of Sheila Majid and Rap music of the Poetic Ammo (local Malaysian female solo singer and pop/rap band respectively).

However, the above phenomenon is no different from the multiple hybrids and adaptation of musical styles developing in America's pop music industry. For example, there is a clear synthetic integration of Arabic influence in Madonna's *Erotica* [Muslim sacred prayer call; faint male voice in Arabic text] and Sting's *Desert Rose*. In both songs, foreign texts are not translated and their exotic identities are maintained; therefore foreign elements are alienated and kept outside. Within the scene of Malaysia's popular music, emulating influences from the outside can be viewed as an example of self re-identification. Foreign influences are not alienated but embraced.

Stylistic integration of music from one culture into another is immune from the constraints emanating from textual semantics of languages. Texts would require the act of interpretation through translation in order to acquire inter-cultural mobility. Musical styles and aesthetics easily pass through from one culture into another. Inviting a foreign style into local grounds has the effect of either decentralizing the local center or completely obliterating it. The phenomenon of 'rap' language from the streets of Brooklyn permeating into the domain of the Malay/Chinese/Indian syntax, either in philological or musical context, will most likely attract and divert the local dominant musical center in favor of the style from the outside. It may seem more likely that local integration of musical style[s] is not obeying the direction of outside-in (appropriation) but instead inside-out (emulation). In other words, the local music movement adopts/emulates and thus compromises local flavors and aesthetics to cater for a preference of stylistic traits of the outside. Therefore, culturally, the local center is being compromised and disassociated from the local subject. This scene of displacement of local subjects in relation to current developing music trends can be seen in architecture, in this case within the context of inter-historical appropriation instead of inter-cultural influence, as explained by Gayatri Spivak:

*When postmodern architectural "historicism" borrows architectural idioms from far-flung periods without any regard for idiomatic coherence or reproduction of appropriate context,...can be seen as a foregrounding of radical citationality,...Here the position of the architect-subject is defined by a distancing and differentiation from (rather than an effacement of) a dominant narrative of history (Spivak 1999: 331).*

A cultural decentralization in music is not only confined to the compromise of both musical stylistic and aesthetic traits but also a related phenomenon of re-signification via other means. For example, in one particular promotional music video of Siti Norhaliza, the local Malay female singer is depicted adopting contact

lenses to have eyes of a foreign other, thus trading off her natural innate local signs for a synthetically applied foreign symbol. In this case, we see a Malay girl 'emulating' foreign eyes, looking towards/at the locals with/through a foreign eye under the pretext of delivering locally produced music. The local audience will have to make certain adjustments in contextualizing what they see and therefore subconsciously deconstruct what signs are viewed as local or foreign elements respectively. With regards to a local response from within post-colonized people, Edward Said stated:

*Exactly as in its triumphant period imperialism tended to license only a cultural discourse that was formulated from within it, today post-imperialism has permitted mainly a cultural discourse of suspicion on the part of formerly colonized peoples...*

[Said 1994:194]

It is quite a common view amongst the local masses that local music is not as appetizing as music from outside; mainly products of the Anglo-American popular music industry. One of the main factors contributing to this behavior is the role of the media. The media plays a great role in directing local trends so that musical styles and various attributes of imported Western music seem to be more universal and therefore influence the musical aesthetics of most current local popular music. Popular music in the local sense means music acquiring the stylistic traits of Western popular music.

It is curiosity rather than suspicion that has been permitted to infiltrate the behavior of the current public. This curiosity allows one to forgo the local center, in the context of identity, for that of other centers. Generally, new local music gravitates toward sounds invented by anOTHER from outside the local territory leading towards an effect of decentralization of one's association with the local center. In other words, a localized re-association of the SELF.

Even the emergence of '*irama Malaysia*' is not exempted from the above phenomenon. Although the term *irama* strictly refers to the rhythmic style of a music, it is now used freely to imply an overall musical style. Musically, reference to an *irama* of the Malay would make more sense rather than reference to an *irama* of a Malaysian which in a pure sense does not exist. Ironically, instead of strengthening the local center as implied by the synthetic labeling of '*irama Malaysia*', the signification of the act indicates otherwise: Furthermore, the reference to '*irama Malaysia*' is a reference made to an association that purely does not exist. Referring to the previous excerpt by Said, it is time for the locals to be suspicious of the local SELF inside the home-territory.

Within this home territory, there seems to be a fear of cultural independence. The grounds of ethnicity in music have been tempered. One example is the re-signification of ethnic music from a functional musical product of culture to a mere object of tourism showcases. Post-colonized times calls for a period of developing a re-gained home. At present, musical culture is inevitably affected by the process of rapid development in the economic, political, and social spheres. With the door opened wide to globalisation, locals are indifferent to factors contributing to the inward movement of foreign musical cultures. Ironically, short of a national orchestra with standards of an international caliber, the nation had to import an orchestra and label it the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra (MPO). Performing works by foreign composers and assigning the *rebab* [local Malay instrument] as the symbol for MPO reflect a paradoxical intention, that is, to attach a sign of local Malay ethnicity to signify Western ideologies of music making. There is not a single instrument in this orchestra which represents literally the logo designed for MPO. The symbol of the *rebab* denotes a local attachment and ownership of a musical event, that is, a national orchestra [geared by a majority of foreign performers]. But the connotation of this symbol expresses otherwise, that is a compromise of the local center making way for the elitism of a center of anOTHER: another event of a cultural decentralization. MPO as an ongoing cultural event contributes to a strengthening of local conformity towards the sounds of the foreign. This decentralization is further enhanced by the unintentional support of the local elite in revering art music from outside. The elite locals attending such events will want to relate to the ears of the people the music was originally intended for, indirectly wanting to receive cultural products of an Empire; French music, German music, Italian music and so on. The absence of a paternal presence of an Empire is sought after once again. There is no suspicion toward products of former empires. This fear of cultural independence is the symptom of a weakening association with the local center. In this respect, the people can no longer be made to relate to a center that provides no natural response and vice versa. The language of Makyong [Malay music theater] no longer speaks to the present people. Independence from the obligations of tradition has given rise to reformulating the cultural past to the extent of discarding it (a constant decentering) to satisfy current trends. This matter should not be misunderstood as a detrimental influence on the local as a collective. Elias Canetti's optimistic view of crowd behavior in relation to 'an unattained goal' is similar to the phenomenon of a crowd's self-inflicted constant decentering:

*Direction is essential for the continuing existence of the crowd. Its constant fear of disintegration means that it will accept any goal. A crowd exists so long as it has an unattained goal (Canetti 1984:29).*

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, there was a surge and an influx of fascination with the oriental when occidentals appropriated oriental arts, culture, and material resources into their culture. During the era of an empire at its height, the Europeans somehow transmitted in various degrees the culture of the orient as one way to demonstrate a subjugation of the colonized peoples and thus placing the occidentals above. On the other hand, it seems that the current younger Malaysian popular music groups and soloists tend to adopt many foreign cultural elements especially of Western popular music with the 'hope' to become like the OTHER rather than to some extent representing the people that was once culturally subjugated. Current popular music of the occidental OTHER are generally praised in terms of their sophisticated production quality, aesthetics, and other general traits. This is apparent in the local pop music scene where it is not enough merely to sound like Western groups or soloists but important also to project a similar image. One can go as far as to state that this 'appropriation' of the sounds of the occidentals may seem more of a necessity than a fascination; a means to 'forgo' the self to become like the OTHER. Karim Raslan associates this 'appropriation' to the mutability of cultural identity:

*A cultural identity is not fixed...Historical and economical factors are constantly at work changing the immutable...much like Malay culture, absorbs and assimilates Western philosophy, Hindi movies, Disney's Aladdin, punk rock, Sufism, Madonna, Chanel and Japanese cartoon books [Raslan, 2000].*

The domain of music education is not spared from the currents of cultural decentralization. Music courses at most local educational institutions necessitate the study of music, which is based generally on western canons; theoretically, historically, aesthetically and practically. External examination boards employing materials from theoretical treatises of European music, are highly regarded and have been used as a major means to assess musical standards of local music students for many decades. Western theoretical treatises and repertoire introduced by these external examination boards are culturally removed from the culture of local students as well as most local teachers. There is an infiltration of superficial traffic of western music education within the whole development process of 'culture building' on local grounds. Inter-cultural understanding that could be generated from the studies of music of the world [mainly European music in the case of local music education], if not carefully promoted, will form a 'disturbance' in the process of the local's contextualization of one's self culture especially amongst local music students. From an early age, many local children were indirectly made unaware of being removed from their potential culture center in

order to be cultivated in the misunderstanding of culture of the others. This 'in-breeding' of appropriation of foreign aesthetics which has further widened the gap, separating and at the same time alienating the ethnic self from the self that is influenced by the other, is hardly as detrimental as a superficial and a synthetic development of cultural [mis]understanding promoted by local teachings of western music.

While ethnic music, especially music of the Malays [Makyong for example] is mostly confined within the academia [for study, research and practical performances] and functions within the tourism industry as a showcase product, Chinese and Indian sacred and secular music are performed at various rituals and temple rites. For example, street Chinese opera performances are held during the Phor Tor festival (the seventh month of the Chinese lunar calendar when souls of the dead are believed to be set free). Application of ethnic music differs within local grounds itself. Nevertheless, local ethnic music is immune but not indifferent to the 'confusion' of foreign influences. Reactions take form in the intensified promotion of local ethnic music through various outreach educational based programs and state support of many local centers of the arts promoting various ethnic music through practical lessons, training and demonstrative performances. Therefore there are two major aesthetic ideologies dominating in the local education of music, that is, the sounds of the foreign west on the one hand and ethnic locals on the other. These two worlds run parallel and independent of one another without conducting any form of reciprocal relations and understanding. They perpetually 'misunderstand' the cultural roles and position of one another. A rather conservative and common accusation towards foreign corruption within cultural formation in local grounds will not be settled if the exponents of local culture do not formulate an open-neutral middle ground for local and foreign elements to interact musically and culturally. For example, the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra could promote interaction through commissions of new local works in addition to exhibiting foreign repertoire. Of course there is less ground on which ethnic aesthetics can entirely cooperate with foreign elements. But a current understanding of the relationship between the two via an interpolation of local and foreign aesthetics placed side by side in any event within cultural development may contribute to a more justifiable local-foreign cultural relationship and understanding nationally.

It should not be misunderstood that a dialogue cannot be formulated between the two worlds. A fascination of aesthetics of the other is merely an attraction to the world of the other in relation to the local self. This attraction occurs in matter of degrees from subtle incorporation of musical sounds and styles of the

foreign to an extent of adopting a total sound and look of the other such as a local band stylistically emulating and portraying an image of a current American band. There is presently a stabilizing pattern in the direction of popular local musical trends, that is, under one music religion: 'worship' of western sounds/aesthetics and an obligated maintenance of different ethnic local aesthetics. In other words, there is an acknowledgment and respect for the music of our local fathers while one looks outside for another inspiration.

Powerful influences of the image and sound identity broadcast by the television media makes no in/direct judgment of the cultural products it shows but merely caters to the marketability of the entertainment product to a wider audience for better ratings and attraction to private sponsorships of the shows. Innocent as this may seem, the media does have an effect on the designs of local music culture. The dialogue between public viewers as a collective and the media is reciprocal in nature. Both perpetually influence one another. A common accusation that the media, especially television, is responsible for the expulsion of local ethnic music culture is not entirely justifiable. The media constantly develops within and towards a 'language' of the most current in order to be understood and readily assimilated by the masses. The functions of ethnic music of the locals no longer provide a pragmatic language capable of communicating with the present locals in general but merely survive as a 'museum' reminder of the rights held by traditions that need preservation. Practice of ethnic musical preservation differs from the practical preservation of the functioning of the music. For example, Makyong does not 'speak' inside the present local musical cultural trends. This is an inevitable corruption developing within local cultural territory. The media should not be blamed on this matter because the roles of the media merely reflect on the roles of the public as a collective, that is, to 'speak' in the 'present tense' between one another within the context of culture and its directions effectively. Unfortunate as it may be, but the 'pulse' of the local music tradition should not synthetically squeeze itself to death inside the ongoing developing cultural scene. The local 'sounds' of the ethnic should maintain its position as a pole indicator of a preserved culture which forms part of the foundation on which events of local musical development and its directions take form.

Cultural corruption within a local music scene is an inevitable phenomenon of cultural development that should not be dictated nor judged. The directions taken within the local music scene should be allowed to flow with the currents of the collective ideologies of the public and media despite the acknowledgment and grumbling of 'individual' intellects and cultural exponents of so-called pure home bred local music. In relation to this, the 'hole', discussed earlier in this

article, is attached to neither negative nor positive implications but should be merely recognized as an inevitable cultural phenomenon in the religion of music within the local territory during the absence of the other fathers made present.

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