

## MUSICAL EXOTICA AND NOSTALGIA: 'LOCALIZING' MALAYSIAN MUSIC VIDEO?

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### INTRODUCTION

Music video has become an essential component of the music recording industry.<sup>1</sup> Introduced in the 1980s as a promotional strategy, music video helps audiences to identify with the artist. It allows 'the public to become acquainted with many aspects of an artist's personality including more subtle ones such as a sense of humour or taste in clothes, friends, spouses and visual images' (Riordan 1991: 311). Today, virtually every single release by both majors and independents is supported by a video. The single song in the video has become a crucial factor in the marketing of an album. The success of stars such as Madonna, Duran-Duran and Paula Abdul has been attributed to their music videos.

Music video took off as a promotional tool with the introduction of cable and satellite television, and non-stop music television programs such as MTV. Founded in 1981 in the United States of America, MTV is the first commercial channel which presents non-stop music videos aimed at audiences between 12-34 years of age. By 1991, MTV had '201 million subscribers across 77 countries' (Sturmer 1993: 51). A number of franchises have been set up in other parts of the world. They include MTV Australia (1987), MTV Brazil (1990), MTV Latino (1993), MTV Europe (1988) and MTV Asia which was launched in Hong Kong in 1991. Even though these branches produce their own shows, they maintain the North American MTV style of broadcasting music video programs (comprising concerts, reviews, interviews, gossip items and chit-chat sessions about fashion, comedy, music, sports) (Sturmer: 1993, Goodwin: 1993).

With the introduction of satellite television and MTV in Malaysia in 1996,<sup>2</sup> Malaysians have been exposed to video clips of pop musicians from the United States, Europe, Hong Kong, Taiwan, India, Australia and other parts of the world. Asian video clips are played in programs such as MTV Asia Hotlist, Most Wanted Asean, Asian Viewer's Choice, Made in India, 100% Indonesia, Bangkok Jam and MTV Ampuh. Channel V airs Asian music clips in programs such as Chinese Top 20 and Asian Top 20. Other channels which feature some

Asian music video programs are Wah Loi Toi (Chinese music video) and Vaanavil (Indian clips).

Since the 1990s, major recording companies and independent labels in Malaysia have been producing their own music video clips to introduce new artists and promote established stars.<sup>3</sup> Recording companies constantly provide television stations with copies of new videos so that the latest releases can be added to their play list. The same music video clips with song texts added across the screen are sold for purposes of karaoke singing.

Many of these clips are aired on locally produced MTV programs such as *MTV Syok (TV2)*, *Muzik TV (TV1)* and *Bintang (NTV7)* which are broadcast on national television as well as *MTV Southeast Asia*.<sup>4</sup> Music video clips are also shown as fillers in between programs on Malaysian television. They are consumed in other settings such as karaoke lounges, cafeterias, dance clubs and coffee shops. Pirated copies of video cassettes and video compact discs are cheaply available for home viewing. Music video clips of particular artists are often projected as stage backdrops during live performances.

Links to advertising are evident in the style of production of the clips. Each clip is about 3-4 minutes in length with fragmentary image changes similar to those in many advertisements. Songs are labelled at the beginning and end (with the name of the artist, title and label) as a sales device but credits are omitted. Interest is stimulated by rapid cutting, dissolves, superimposition and other special effects (Banks: 1998, Kaplan: 1987).

Music video clips are also promotional tools produced by Radio-Televisyen Malaysia (RTM, which operates TV1 and TV2) to promote government policies. The country that 'sings together stays together' seems to be the rationale of RTM. Music video clips have been created to stir patriotic, to instill a feeling of loyalty towards Malaysia, and to create public awareness of the government's new ideas and objectives. All patriotic songs on the airwaves are sanctioned by the Information Ministry and are played in between programs throughout the time of transmission of TV1 and TV2 (*Star*, March 16, 1998).

Realizing that audiences are not homogeneous, attempts have been made by music video producers to 'localize' their products so as to attract Malaysian consumers. This paper looks at the extent of local content in Malaysian music video by analysing the music, lyrics and visual imagery of Malay music video clips. How local are Malay music video which employ the Malay language and a Malay cast?<sup>5</sup> Do they open up spaces for alternative identities to emerge or do they follow the norm of Anglo-American mainstream pop videos?

## Categories of Malay Music Video in Malaysia

In general, the music video is an interpretation of a particular song. The music, lyrics and visual imagery in a video create a style and mood which identify the type of pop music or pop star being featured. Each type of pop music video also corresponds to a particular presentational format. Kaplan (1987) describes five typical video types: the Romantic, the Socially Conscious, the Nihilist, the Classical and the Postmodern. Critics such as Goodwin (1987: 42) have found this categorization weak because there is an overlap of criteria for each category and clips in one category can be placed in another. Banks (1998: 295) categorizes Anglo-American videos into: (a) 'performance' videos which portray a band performing in a studio or a concert; and (b) 'concept' videos that portray stories or abstract themes. Distinctions between the two are less clear when the artist is both singing and playing a role in the video clip. This paper follows the formats proposed by Banks. However, conceptual videos with abstract themes that leave the spectator decentered or with elaborate scenarios are rare in Malaysia.

Selections of Malay music video analyzed here are representative samples of clips shown on Malaysian television. They provide us with some idea of the general categories, characteristics and the degree of 'localization' in Malay music video.

### (i) Pop videos

Pop videos correspond to mainstream commercial pop music influenced by Anglo-American easy listening pop. They include Malay *balada* (ballads), soft versions of R&B, folk rock and folk blues. Commercial pop stars include Nora, Jeslina Hashim, Sharifah Aini, Siti Nurhaliza, Innuendo, Amy Mastura and Sheila Majid. Commercial pop music videos are often played on radio and television and are also popular with karaoke singers.

Pop videos highlight tuneful and memorable melodies which are repeated. The music is formulaic, bound by conventions of pop (in terms of pitch, rhythm and phrase structure). The melody remains rigidly within the 4-bar phrase structure alternating between a refrain and a chorus. The star's voice is in the foreground while instrumentation is light. Instrumental arrangement is standardized consisting of keyboard and electric guitar. Drums are soft pedaled or muffled. Minor chords are constantly used to illustrate song lines about love, loss and sometimes reunion. Titles include *Seksa* (Agony) by Sharifah Aini and *Dia* (He) by Fauziah Latiff.

Corresponding to the lyrics based on sentimental love, an overall nostalgic, dreamlike, yearning quality defines this type of video. Visual imagery often focuses on male/female love relationships or parent/child bonding. The pain of separation is played out. There is less focus on musical instruments or the band in performance.

Very often, there is no storyline and characters in the videos are not developed as segments change continually. Disparate images are held together by the pop star's voice and the constant return to her/his lip-synching face. Most pop videos are simply scenes of stars plucking and smelling flowers while walking in a garden or park, standing next to a waterfall or strolling by the beach. The stars often sing melancholic songs while lighting candles in the bedroom or living room of a mansion.

As in pop videos from America and Europe, stereotypical visions of women as objects of desire are projected. Women are portrayed as simultaneously needy, submissive and childlike. Pretty and beautiful pop stars are projected. There is a preoccupation with close-ups of women's faces drawing attention to women as objects of the male gaze (Dibben: 1999). However, the Malay women portrayed in these videos are never provocatively dressed and usually wear long pants, *baju kurung* or *kebaya* which cover their bodies completely.

*Ku Intai Cinta Dalam Rahsia* (I Peep at Love in Secret) by Jeslina Hashim is a typical example of a Malay pop video. The pop star is filmed lip-synching in different settings looking forlorn. She is in love but the man she is in love with is not aware. One moment finds her sitting on a bed in the bedroom (holding a flower and throwing paper aeroplanes), while in the next instance, she is in the living room of a mansion (lighting candles), and then in the forest (plucking petals off a flower and putting them in her mouth). Images of a male character (the one she loves) is superimposed ever so often.

Some video clips intertwine nostalgia and melancholy as the singers recall memories of the family and 'older' ways of kampung life. Footage of padi fields, fishing villages, family gatherings and photographs of the singer's father and mother often shot in black and white are common. *Kepadamu Kekasih* (To My Love) by Hattan is about a son who misses his father. The face of the old man is juxtaposed between images of the sun setting, fishing boats, moving clouds and a boy running in the sea. In other clips, singers recall past relationships while growing up in the kampung. In *Di Persimpangan Dilema* (At the Crossroad of Dilemma), Nora is projected as a little girl running in the padi fields holding hands with a boy. They grow up riding bicycles. The clip ends with the boy and girl growing apart letting go of their hands. She longs for the past.

## (ii) Rap

Rap is a narrative form of vocal delivery which is spoken using specific rhythms over a continuous beat. The form relies upon the ability to ‘talk in rhythm’. In many countries, the art of rapping has become a vehicle for venting anger and expressing local issues (Perkins: 1996). Malay rappers, however, tend to focus on lyrics about love and the loss of love. Malay rap groups often combine pop and soft R & B with rap in their albums. In a sense, much of their music is not very different from commercial pop. For this reason, rap is categorised under Pop Music in the *Anugerah Industri Muzik* (AIM) [Music Industry Award] and TV3’s *Juara Lagu* (Song Champion) competitions.

There is a greater degree of narrative in rap videos compared to the commercial pop ones. Images of singers lip-synching in diverse locales alternate with narrative scenes. *Jangan Lafazkan* (Do Not Utter) begins with the KRU brothers lip-synching in the train. The next shot shows a woman serving her husband a meal but he pushes away the plate of food as she approaches. She picks up the broken glass. The singers appear again lip-synching on a bridge on top of a highway. The man in the narrative then tries to make up to his wife by bringing her flowers and taking her out. Halfway through their journey, they quarrel and she gets out of the car. The KRU singers are seen lip-synching in the rain. The woman in the narrative is knocked down by a car but her spirit escapes. As in the pop video, stereotyped portrayal of women occurs in the rap video. She is the long-suffering wife who dies in the end.

Commentaries about society occasionally appear. Through their songs *Fanatik* (Fanatic) and *Negatif* (Negative), for example, KRU (the most prominent Malay rap group) reminds youths to “volunteer to die than live a life full of hypocrisy” (*rela mati dari hidup penuh hipokrasi*) and “to open their minds, don’t look negatively only” (*fikir cara terbuka, jangan pandang negatif sahaja*). In 1998, KRU produced a video clip *Fobia* (Phobia) about the traumatic experience they were put through as their nation wide tour KRUMania was interrupted and banned in a few venues. Authorities claimed that the concerts promoted ‘negative values’. This video clip shows the brothers being pursued on land, sea and sky in stretched limousines, jet skis, speedboats and a private jet.

## (iii) Pop Rock

Most Malay rock groups in Malaysia promote two main styles of rock. The first – known as ‘slow rock’ or ‘rock ballad’ – resembles the core of mainstream popular songs described above except that the sound is slightly hardened.

Melodies are easy to hum and minor chords prevail. Lyrics are about romantic love.

The second style which rockers refer to as 'heavy metal' features heavy drums and electric bass providing the beat and bass sound for the voice and lead guitar. The electric guitar plays riffs. Although singers sing in almost 'hoarse' (*serak*) voices, the melodic component is still prominent. In the 1980s, rock bands such as The Wings invited the audience to 'fight' (*berjuang*) against injustice, greed, power, money and drugs' (*Hukum Karma /Condemn Fate*) and to fight for peace, for the nation (race), for rockers' rights and to rock away their problems ("Rock" by The Rusty Blade).

However, since the 1990s, many rock bands, especially those that have contracts with transnational recording companies, have conformed; they sing commercial rock ballads which are not very different from pop. To some rock musicians, music produced by rock groups such as Search or Wings have become so commercialized that they can no longer be called rock! (*NSunT*, 11 Feb. 1990). A few of these critics have dedicated themselves to 'thrash metal' and other types of heavy metal with high decibel and discordant sounds. They perform songs with anti-nuclear, anti-drug and social messages in live concerts and clubs (Tan: 2002).

Rock videos shown on television are rock ballads which focus on the pain of separation and lost love. Titles include *Di Pintu Mahligai* (At the Door of the Castle) by Iklim, *Luka Seribu Rindu* (Hurt by a Thousand Desires) by Fotograf, *Pergilah Sayang* (Go My Love) by Korie and *Usang* (Withered) by Rahim Maarof. As in *Tragedi Oktober* (October Tragedy) by Awie, performers wear leather or corduroy jackets and ride big motorbikes to identify themselves as rockers. Needless to say, rock videos that receive airplay on Malaysian television are those with music that is not disorienting or disturbing, with no shock effects or images that violate those of the dominant and mainstream culture. Songs by heavy metal groups such as "Atomic War" and *Senjata Gila* (Mad Weapons) by May do not receive airplay.

Compared to pop videos which seldom show the band, rock videos are basically performance videos. They portray rock stars lip-synching songs in front of a camera in a recording studio or at a concert (often intercut with brief visual fragments). Close-ups of the band are common. *Demi* (As Soon As) juxtaposes black and white segments of Ella singing on stage (amidst artificial smoke) with segments of her singing with the band in the studio. She wears a leather jacket. *Kejoraku Bersatu* (My United Star) by Search projects alternating images of the lead singer recording in the studio, a young woman looking forlorn

and close-ups of the band members singing, playing the guitar and standing by the seaside.

Videos of singers performing live at concerts with close-ups of performers playing instruments and lots of hands waving in front of the singer are also common. *Laila Namamu Teratas* (Laila Your Name is on Top) is a clip of a live performance by Search.

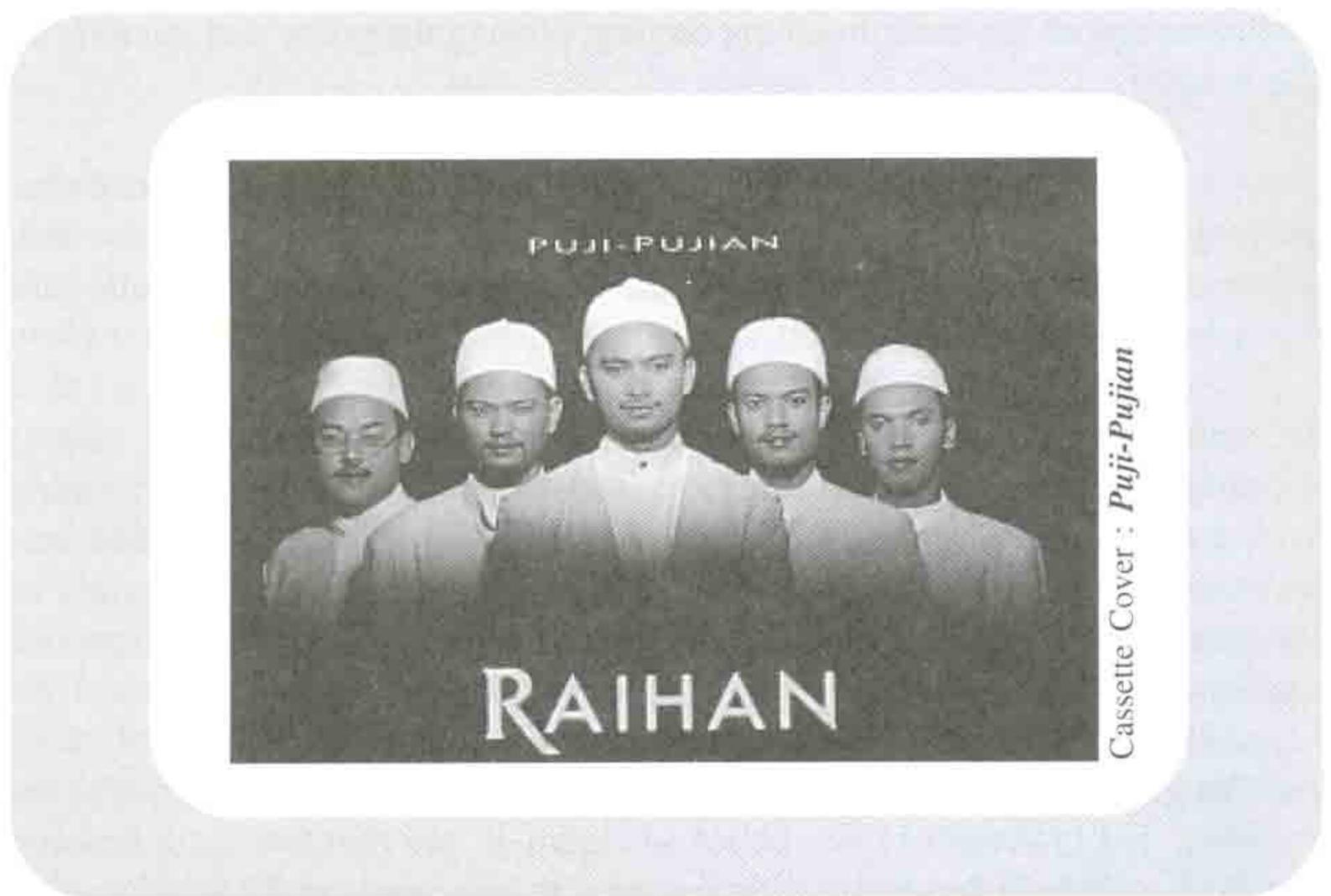
In contrast to pop videos which focus on the singer lip-synching in various locations, rock video stars are seen in the video narrative as well as performing with the band in the studio. Many rock videos show shots of the technicians recording the pop artist and cameramen filming the singers and musicians of the band, all of which enhance the reality effect (as opposed to the dreamlike quality of pop videos).

#### (iv) *Nasyid* Pop

*Nasyid* is a type of Islamic devotional song with texts praising Allah. Universal love, brotherhood in Islam and other religious themes feature. The pop version emerged in the 1990s when groups such as Raihan and Hijjaz began to sing *nasyid* in two or three part harmony *a cappella* or with instrumental accompaniment. Pop *nasyid* is accompanied by percussion instruments such as the Malay *kompang* and *rebana* which have been traditionally used in some Islamic musical genres. Cowbells and congo drums have also been added. The drums interlock around the basic *masri* rhythm. Samples of *gamelan* melodies are often superimposed on the voice parts.

Video clips of *nasyid* pop show almost no narrative. Images which are conducive for prayer and meditation are arbitrarily employed in the song and are usually not connected to the lyrics. Black and white segments are juxtaposed with coloured clips of singers lip-synching in continually changing settings. Backdrops include the mountain, river, sunset, mosque, padi field and the desert (as though one were in the Middle East). Often, singers play the Malay *rebana* or *kompang* frame drums as well. *Cinta yang Suci* (Pure Love) shows the Raihan singers lip-synching in the padi field and in the vicinity of the mosque. In *Zapin Syukur* (Zapin of Thanksgiving), images of the Hijjaz singers lip-synching and playing *kompang* (Malay frame drum) are superimposed on footage of *gamelan* instruments, clouds, coconut trees, the sea and the mosque.

The male performers are identified by their Nehru-type jackets with Mandarin collars and kopiah in earthy tones and different shades of pastel colours. *Nasyid* video clips receive frequent air play as the government tries to disseminate Islamic values to the people. Live performances of *nasyid* are also telecast.



#### (v) *Dangdut Pop*

*Dangdut* refers to Hindustani-influenced pop which uses the Indian tabla for rhythmic accompaniment. The genre first emerged in Indonesia in the 1960s and the term *dangdut* refers to the low-pitched drum stroke on the fourth beat, followed by a high-pitched drum stroke on the first beat of a four-beat measure. Also used are electric guitars, the western drum set, flute, synthesizer and keyboard. The vocal style resembles that employed in Hindustani popular film songs. Lyrics are almost surely about romantic love. Examples include *Rindu* (Yearning for someone) by Amelina, *Tergoda* (Tormented) by Mas Idayu, *Panas Dingin* (Hot Cold) by Sheeda, *Gelitik Cinta* (To Arouse Love) by Mas Idayu and *Cinta* (Love) by Eva.

As *dangdut pop* is essentially dance music, video clips inevitably show *dangdut* singers with an entourage of dancers gyrating to the beat. The mystique of the music and exotica is highlighted in the videos by including footage showing dancers performing exotic dances in imaginary landscapes. In *Cinta oh Cinta* (Love oh Love), Amelina and her dancers perform a flamenco-type dance and gyrate to the repeated rhythmic pulse in the jungle and in a mansion. In *Boleh Boleh* (Can, Able To), Mas Idayu combines *dangdut* with *bhangra* movements (a dance style originating from the region of Punjab performed during harvest celebrations) which is popular among the Punjabis of Malaysia. She and the dancers perform in a garden.

Women in *dangdut* video clips are treated as objects of visual pleasure. Image-wise all women *dangdut* singers seem to promote bizarre tastes in fashion: loud colours to go with sexy lacy outfits, sophisticated ballroom gowns or traditional costumes. Their apparel are filled with darts and panels, ruffles, piping and intricate embroidery. Material used include velvet, organza, tafetta, and anything believed to spell glamour. Accessories ranging from feathers and gloves to bangles and fans are employed in abundance. The singers and dancers usually tie their hair up in buns and ponytails. The dancers in *Cinta oh Cinta* (Amelina) are dressed in ballroom gowns made of stiff material of an imaginary previous era and they carry hand fans. Mas Idayu and her team of backup dancers wear colourful Punjabi garments in many colours and floral motifs in *Boleh Boleh*.

Few *dangdut pop* videos are shown on Malaysian television compared to pop, rock and *nasyid* videos. The few videos that receive airplay feature women artistes (in particular) who follow decorum and propriety. In general, *dangdut* is considered *kampung* music (village music), catering to the “lower class”, and is usually performed live at funfairs and weddings. The gyrating movements of the hips and sexy costumes are not considered “classy”. However, it contains ingredients for great dance music and has a big following in dance clubs and discos. Kuala Lumpur has several of these clubs and discos such as the Tiara Dangdut, Mawar Biru, Istana Dangdut, Sun Dangdut and Yasmin Dangdut where young people gyrate to the pulsating and hypnotic *dangdut* beat. *Dangdut* cassettes are best sellers.

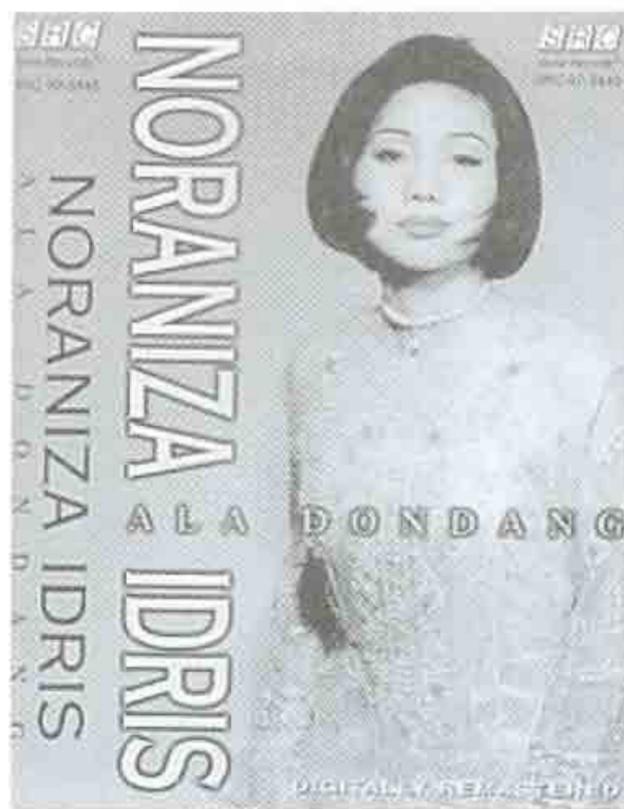


Cassette Cover : *Cinta oh Cinta*

(vi) *Irama Malaysia* (Malaysian Beat)

*Irama Malaysia* is a type of pop music which is characterised by the addition of Malay musical elements (melodic phrases, rhythm, instruments, timbre) to the Anglo-American pop idiom and instrumentation (which includes the keyboard, electric bass guitar and drums). Although composers such as Suhaimi Md. Zain (better known as Pak Ngah) and singers such as Noraniza Idris, Amir, Jamal Abdillah and Siti Nurhaliza claim that *Irama Malaysia* incorporates Malay classical and folk music, musicians have thus far only exploited social dance and syncretic music such as *asli*, *joget*, *inang*, *zapin* and *ghazal*. Some *dikir barat* from Kelantan and *keroncong* have also been incorporated.<sup>6</sup> Memorable melodies ranging from medium to fast tempo set in refrain-chorus strophic form are composed to attract the young.

The late 1990s saw a surge of interest in such “ethnic” influenced songs. *Irama Malaysia* albums like *Awallah Dondang*, *Masyhur* (Noraniza Idris), *Cindai*, *Sahmura* (Siti Nurhaliza) and *Samrah* (Jamal Abdillah) were produced. Some of these albums bagged top prizes at the TV3 Juara Lagu Song Competition and at the AIM Awards for three consecutive years. There have been earlier attempts in the 1970s and 1980s to absorb essences of the old into the new. Such versions, however, over-emphasized the use of the electric guitar, synthesizer and western drum set. Only one or two songs were introduced into pop albums so as to make the singer seem versatile.



Cassette Cover : *Ala Dondang*

Influenced by world beat, *Irama Malaysia* musicians of the 1990s stress the mixture of a variety of traditional instruments such as the *rebana*, *kompang*, *tar rodan*, *gendang dikir*, *tabla* and *gambus* with the accordion all played by experienced musicians. They say that the “authentic” *asli* feel is lost when a song is too heavily synthesized (NST 27 Feb. 1998). The traditional feel is also portrayed through the use of a nasal vocal quality, tremolo and melisma which are characteristic of Arabic koranic cantillation, and ornamentation which typify traditional Malay music singing.

The lyrics of many *Irama Malaysia* songs are written in Malay verse (*pantun*) form. According to song lyricist, Khairol Anuar Harun (interview on TV program *Masyhur*), verses of *Irama Malaysia* are about love, beauty and religion. Some songs give advice on correct behaviour and customs while others promote traditional Malay music. In *Dikir Puteri* (Princess Dikir), Noraniza Idris, a popular *Irama Malaysia* singer calls on people to live and work together as in the village. She urges the young to revive and to make known traditional Malay songs in *Dondang Dendang* (Lullaby Song).

Most *Irama Malaysia* video clips are performance videos which feature live footage of performances in the television studio and close-ups of instruments intercut with other fragments. The song’s arrangement is emphasized through the close-ups of the traditional instruments. As Malay social dance music forms the core of *Irama Malaysia*, background dancers dressed in traditional Malay costumes performing stylized choreographed versions of the dances are featured.<sup>7</sup> *Samrah Mentari* collages different types of dance movements and costumes from various genres.

Performance videos of live or stage performances are also shown on television. *Cindai* (Printed Silk Fabric) is a typical clip of an *Irama Malaysia* stage performance by Siti Nurhaliza. The music combines *zapin* and *inang* (interview with Pak Ngah, TV Program *Masyhur*). Wearing traditional costume and head dress, Siti is accompanied by a group of young boys performing the *zapin* dance on stage. The musicians play different types of Malay drums, accordion and flute. In the performance format, the performer seems to be singing to the viewer, as opposed to merely being an actor lip-synching in the shot.

*Irama Malaysia* epitomises a particular kind of musical exotica. Malaysian musicians engage the listener through fascination and exotica by using folk instrumentation and sounds. While aspects of the sound are familiar to some, young Malaysians who have no knowledge of Malay music have found the lively rhythms and scales, among other elements, as exotic. The audience is

engaged in an aural and visual spectacle, especially in live performances where an enormous stage is filled with a huge ensemble of western and local instruments, large numbers of backup dancers with colourful, elaborate costumes and striking colours of stage lighting.

*Irama Malaysia* video clips enjoy airplay on prime time television. They are in line with the government's policy to encourage local music programs and to promote Malay culture along the lines of the National Cultural Policy (1970). However, it should be stressed that interest in such folk-Malay music is still minimal especially among the younger generation which seems to be more interested in mainstream Malay or Anglo-American pop.

#### (vi) Patriotic Songs

Finally, video clips of patriotic songs saturate the airwaves. All patriotic songs on the airwaves are sanctioned by the Information Ministry. These video clips have been created to stir patriotic spirit and to instill a feeling of loyalty towards Malaysia. They also create public awareness of the government's new ideas and objectives. Titles include *Setia* (Loyal), *Sejahtera Malaysia* (Tranquil/Safe Malaysia), *Cinta IT* (Love Information Technology (IT)), "We are Proud to be Malaysians", *Cintai Bahasa* (Love the Malay Language) and *Malaysia Boleh* (Malaysia Can) to name a few. To instill good values and social awareness, there are also songs that pay tribute to mothers, teachers, farmers and fishermen.

The songs are characterized by catchy tunes, upbeat rhythms, cooperative activity and a festive spirit. They are based on the pop idiom in terms of melody, rhythm and instrumentation. Marches are often used in patriotic songs. Occasionally, rhythms and melodies played by local instruments such as frame drums or *gamelan* are superimposed on the pop idiom. Song lyrics are printed across the screen. Literal visual imagery of the message in the song is projected.

*Malaysia Boleh* is a typical example. The song uses a pop tune with a melody which is easy to sing and an upbeat tempo. *Kompang* rhythms are superimposed on the basic pop band arrangement. Instrumentation includes keyboards, bass, drums and trumpets. Visual imagery corresponds to the text which lauds Malaysia's achievements. Malaysians are shown competing in and winning international sports events as well as climbing Mount Everest. Clips of the Multimedia Super Corridor and the Petronas Twin Towers (the tallest building in the world) are shown. Segments also show off Malaysia's diverse industries — oil palm, Proton car, tourism and local handicraft. Malaysia is projected as rich in indigenous culture. Images of the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Dato Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad and his ministers are also portrayed.

Video clips of patriotic songs are played in between programs throughout the time of transmission of TV1 and TV2. They receive the most airplay compared to other video clips. During elections special video clips are created as part of the ruling party's campaign.

## HOW 'LOCAL' IS MALAYSIAN MUSIC VIDEO?

In order to be commercially viable and to attract a wide audience, Malaysian video clips produced by local recording companies emulate the global popular sound and visual style of MTV. As shown above, they are mainly commercial easy-listening pop and rock videos. They adhere to the standard framework of Anglo-American popular music in terms of instrumentation, harmony and melodic structure. Rock bands featured on music video play sentimental rock with the sound level significantly toned down. Lyrics are predictably about love, the pain of separation or nostalgia for the past life with the entire family in the *kampung*.

Malaysian pop/rock music videos also follow MTV visual techniques and imagery. As in MTV, visual cliches such as artificial rising smoke are common. Black and white segments are juxtaposed, artists lip-synch in continually changing settings, various images are collaged within a frame, old television and movie fragments are sometimes added and postmodern cut 'n' mix aesthetics<sup>8</sup> predominate. Visual imagery does not overwhelm the music. There is very little narrative in the pop music video and most of these videos show artistes lip-synching in the garden, hotel, city or by the beach. Women are portrayed as objects of the male gaze. In contrast to the dreamlike quality of pop videos, rock videos try to project reality by showing the band recording in the studio, technicians recording the artists as well as scenes of live rock concerts. The only local elements found in the commercial pop/rock videos are the Malay language, Malay costumes, Malay people and visual images of Malaysian scenery, local buildings and Proton cars.

From our analysis, *nasyid*, *dangdut* and *Irama Malaysia* music videos seem to have incorporated more local musical elements into their songs and music videos. These local elements are, however, ethnic flavours which have been added to the already existing dominant Anglo-American pop genre. Samples of local melodic instruments (for example, *gamelan*) are superimposed on tuneful melodies based on a standard pop harmony provided by guitars and keyboards. Social dance rhythms (*joget*, *inang*) played on indigenous drums fit into the 4 or 8 beat phrase structure typical of pop music. The vocal style is pop-oriented although melismatic phrases similar to koranic cantillation are sometimes introduced in *nasyid* and *Irama Malaysia*. In general, the local flavours do not over-shadow the Anglo-American pop framework. The musicians engage the listener through fascination, spectacle and exotica by

adding folk instruments and colours. Although this kind of domestic exotica may be innovative, stylization has occurred so that *Irama Malaysia* songs are invariably accompanied by local frame and barrel drums, Malay flute or *gamelan* samples. Drumming patterns are gradually built up from simple to complex textures and back to simple at the end.

Even though *dangdut*, *nasyid* and *Irama Malaysia* videos have specific local iconographic elements (close-ups of traditional instruments, costumes and movements) to reach their distinct markets, they use the collage and cut 'n' mix aesthetics of other commercial pop videos. The basic composition of the music video corresponds to the style of global, easy-listening, 'exotica' artists shown on MTV.

Is 'local' identity being projected through Malaysian music video? This paper illustrates that a particular kind of musical exotica prevalent in the international 'world beat' dominates local music video — nostalgia for 'traditional' cultures and way of life; inclusion of exotic/ethnic 'flavourings' (local instruments, vocal ornamentation or particular rhythmic patterns and melodic modes) to the mainstream pop music idiom; and an emphasis on spectacle and glamour. Although the musicians claim that they are 'localizing' Malay pop and music video, they do so only to the extent that they inject and overlay recognizably Malay elements onto an existing dominant global package in terms of language, technology and 'stereotype' employed by musicians all over the world (Guilbault: 1993, Erlmann: 1993, Feld: 1994).

Malay pop musicians are also aware that all music videos are screened by a censorship board before they can be aired by any local television.<sup>9</sup> To avoid censorship by the Ministry of Information, there must be no display of oppositional or subcultural messages and imagery. Lyrics must comply to accepted norms of public speech with no extreme political statements, offensive language or violent content. It is known that pop songs and video clips that might disturb Islamic sensitivities or 'wild behaviour' or are politically-oriented in content will be censored<sup>10</sup> (Tan: 1990). It is therefore not surprising that socially conscious video clips such as Bruce Springsteen's "Born in the USA" or Midnight Oil's "Best of Both Worlds" are non-existent. The postmodern video which refuses to position itself and leaves the spectator decentered is also not produced in Malaysia (Kaplan 1987: chap 4).

By way of conclusion, to be commercially viable and to escape censorship, Malay music videos shown on Malaysian television follow the styles of global easy-listening pop artistes on MTV. The overall sound is one that is unobtrusive without significant intense dynamic levels. Local musical elements added do

not overwhelm the basic Anglo-American pop idiom. The music, lyrics and visual imagery must not be controversial, offensive, disturbing or shocking.

While Malaysian identities are being contested elsewhere, music video promotes an identity that is fundamentally non-confrontational. It is based on a global 'stereotype' that draws its contents from romanticized nostalgia and exotica. Women are portrayed as submissive and needy. Artistes lip-synch in quiet, stable and dreamlike environments. Those who wish to receive TV airplay are pressured to conform to the dictates of the market and the government.

However, this is not to say that no alternative forms of popular music or culture exist in Malaysia. In fact, as I have shown in previous articles (Tan: 1990, 1995, 2002), many musicians who do not receive airplay have been able to innovate beyond the confines of the transnational recording companies and national television. Thrash and heavy musicians play loud heavy metal music with subcultural messages in clubs and open-air concerts and produce their own Do-It -Yourself (DIY) albums and music videos which they sell to their fans. Dangdut stars who do not conform to RTM guidelines are able to gyrate freely in dance clubs. Singers and composers who work in non-mainstream styles provide an alternative flow of musics. These singers (such as Rafique Rashid) mainly perform live music in pubs, cafes and restaurants using Malay, English and Mandarin as the main languages of communication. They go for the unplugged acoustic sound and songs with social concerns. Responding to demonstrations calling for *reformasi* (reformation) in the late 1990s, alternative and fringe artistes organized a multidisciplinary arts festival which featured alternative art exhibitions, poetry reading and musical performances to express their concerns.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This paper was first presented at the International Workshop on 'Local Agency and Local Identity in Television, Comparative Perspectives on Media Content and Reception in Asia', Cititel, Penang, May 13-14, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> There are two government-owned national television channels (TV1 and TV2) set up in the 1960s, three private channels (TV3, NTV7 and Metro TV) and a private cable television station (Mega TV) established in the 1980s and 1990s. TV1 and TV2 are operated by Radio Televisyen Malaysia (RTM). All television stations play clips of current hits by Anglo-American and Malay pop stars. Some local English and Chinese music video clips are occasionally featured. Film clips of Hindi film stars and pop singers from Hong Kong and Taiwan are also played. Locally produced MTV shows feature local announcers introducing video clips in Malay or English and interviews with local and foreign singers. Satellite broadcasting (introduced in 1996) has made available many new channels of non-stop television. The main channels which broadcast music video are MTV and Channel V.

<sup>3</sup> Besides music video clips, recording companies also make videos of concert performances, music-oriented documentaries and biographical specials of stars.

<sup>4</sup> According to Sutton (2000), MTV programs have been broadcast by Star TV in Hong Kong since 1991 but MTV Networks Asia was set up in Singapore in 1995. MTV Networks Asia is made up of three MTV channels: MTV India, MTV Mandarin and MTV Asia (in 1999 MTV Asia became MTV Southeast Asia). Music videos presented on MTV Southeast Asia include those of top international stars and selected groups from Southeast Asia. Shows are often hosted by VJs who are bilingual (speaking English as well as their own local language).

<sup>5</sup> Video clips of locally-composed songs sung in English, Mandarin and Tamil are also produced by the various ethnic groups in Malaysia. In line with the National Culture Policy which aims to promote Malay culture, these clips receive very little airplay on national television.

<sup>6</sup> See Tan (1993: chapter 7) for definitions of *asli*, *inang*, *zapin* and *joget*. They are basically Malay social dance music with characteristic rhythmic patterns associated with each of them. The folk ensemble comprises a violin, accordion, *rebana* (frame drum) and gong. *Dikir Barat* is a type of social music from Kelantan which is sung antiphonally and accompanied by frame drums and gongs. *Keroncong* is also a form of social syncretic music which originated from Indonesia but was brought to Malaysia in the early twentieth century. The basic ensemble comprises a flute, guitar, ukelele, mandolin, cello, double bass and a singer.

<sup>7</sup> See Tan (2003) for a discussion of how the *asli*, *inang*, *zapin* and *joget* have been institutionalized and standardized by the film industry, national cultural institutions and television. The folk performances are highly charged. Teasing and flirtatious dance movements, improvisation and the exchange of witty verses predominate in the folk form.

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of postmodern aesthetics in music video, see Kaplan 1987 (chap. 3). Kaplan argues that the characteristic traits of music video are based on the postmodern condition. Visuals are fragmentary and combine practices of classical high art and commercial pop culture. Film pastiches are common. The videos are also self-reflexive. There is a blurring of distinctions between a real subject and a fictional image.

<sup>9</sup> TV1 and TV2 are government owned. TV3 belongs to the Utusan Group which is aligned to the main ruling party, UMNO. Metro TV's major shareholders are also the Utusan Group. TV3 and the Malaysian Ministry of Finance are the biggest shareholders of Mega TV while the CEO of NTV7 is the former director of the State Economic Development Corporation of Sarawak. After the 1999 elections, he was appointed federal Minister of Agriculture (Zaharom Nain 2002).

<sup>10</sup> RTM has even banned rock musicians with long hair to appear on television in 1986 (Tan: 1992).