Negotiating ‘His Master's Voice’:
Gramophone Music and Cosmopolitan Modernity in British Malaya in the 1930s and Early 1940s

Tan Sooi Beng
Professor of Ethnomusicology, Department of Music
School of the Arts, Universiti Sains Malaysia
sbtan@usm.my

Abstract
The label ‘His Master's Voice’ (HMV) dominated the recording technology, production and distribution of 78 rpm discs in British Malaya in the 1930s and early 1940s. By analysing the lagu Melayu which formed a large part of the repertoire recorded by HMV, this article shows that musicians were able to decentre colonial hegemony by combining Anglo-American popular music idioms with Malay and other foreign musical elements. The new hybrid music with texts about progress was a vehicle for disseminating a form of national culturalism that advocated vernacular modernity, rooted cosmopolitanism, inclusiveness, and a broader sense of Malayness.

Keywords
gramophone recordings, His Master’s Voice, lagu Melayu, rooted cosmopolitanism, colonial modernity, nationalism

Gramophone companies were transnational in the early twentieth century and actively looked for new markets by following the trade routes of the colonial powers. I would like to thank the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV) and the project on ‘Articulating Modernities: The Making of Popular Music in 20th Century Southeast Asia and the Rise of New Audiences’ for a fellowship to conduct research in Leiden in 2011. Thanks also to Philip Yampolsky, Bart Barendregt, Peter Keppy and Henk Schulte Nordholt for their comments and support. I would also like to thank Jaap Erkelens for sharing 78 rpm recordings from his personal collection. The 78 rpm discs analysed in this article are from the collection of Naina Merican which were donated to the...
places where their own country’s colonial interests were strong. It is therefore not surprising that the English-based Gramophone Company (GC) was the first to make records in British Malaya in 1903 and dominated record production there until the Second World War. Until 1915, GC used label names such as the Gramophone Record, Gramophone Concert Record and Gramophone Monarch Record. Although a picture of a dog appeared on the labels of some of these early records, it was not until January 1916 that the label name ‘His Master’s Voice’ (HMV) was formally employed. HMV was also known as ‘Chap Anjing’ (Dog Label) in British Malaya (Figure 1).

This article examines the production and dissemination of the lagu Melayu (Malay song), which formed the main repertoire recorded by GC and its sister companies in British Malaya (including Singapore), as well as this music’s style and content. Lagu Melayu refers to the hybrid popular music sung in the Malay language which was disseminated through the mass media and local theatres to a large and diverse audience throughout British Malaya in the 1930s and early 1940s. This article aims to illustrate

Universiti Malaya Library but are now in the National Archives in Kuala Lumpur. I also visited the British Sound Archives to study the record catalogues, and the Oriental and India Office Collections Reading Room (British Library), London, for the Malayan film magazines.

2 The English gramophone companies were predominant in the colonies of India and Egypt, German companies in China, Turkey and the Dutch East Indies; the French companies were most active in North Africa, and the North American companies in Latin America and the Philippines. Gronow’s seminal work on the gramophone recording industry in Asia gives an account of the different companies that were active in the region (Gronow 1981). See Jones (2001) for an analysis of the gramophone companies and the music they recorded in China.

3 Malay or Melayu has been the medium of communication and writing among the diverse Malay peoples in the Malay archipelago and is marked by ‘heterogeneity’ (Foulcher and Day 2002). In this article, different spellings of specific Malay words are used, especially in the titles of songs and quotations from newspapers. I have followed the spellings as found in the newspapers, record catalogues, and record labels quoted. For instance, keronchong, kronchong, and krontjong are all used, following the various printed versions. There was no standardization of the spelling of Bahasa Indonesia and Bahasa Melayu in the 1930s and 1940s.

4 Philip Yampolsky (2010a and 2010b) has estimated that about 27,805 recordings were made in British Malaya (including Singapore) and the Dutch East Indies from 1903 to 1942 (prior to World War II). A total of 18,451 records were made for the The Dutch East Indies, while 6,944 Malay and 2,410 Chinese records were produced for British Malaya. See Yampolsky (2010a and 2010b) for descriptions and images of the labels in both regions, their issue and matrix numbers, and information about the recording engineers.
that the control exercised by GC and its sister companies over the recording technology, production and dissemination of 78 rpm discs in the two decades before the Japanese Occupation did not lead to ‘homogeneity’ and ‘standardization of content’ (Adorno 1994), or ‘cultural grey out’ (Lomax 1968:4). Even though the *lagu Melayu* incorporated instruments and musical elements from Anglo-American popular music and was commodified for consumption, the new music was neither completely Malay nor completely Anglo-American but a combination of both. It also incorporated Chinese, Indian and Arabic elements. Gramophone recordings stimulated fusion, stylistic borrowing and localization all at the same time. As they adapted to changes in the British colonial society, the recording artistes and musicians actively merged elements of commercial Anglo-American popular music with Malay lyrics about the problems and hopes of ordinary people to generate new meanings. The interaction of different cultures in pre-World War II colonial Malaya resulted in a fusion that Bakhtin (2001) describes as an ‘organic hybridity’ which led to the formation of a ‘new language’ or ‘world view’.

The musicians of British Malaya appropriated western technology, media and music to create a new musical idiom which was ‘modern’ (*moden*). It was not only characterized by currency, continuity and difference, but it also advocated change, progress and agency. This type of colonial modernity was built on the values of European ‘liberal humanism’ as well as reformist Islam, a modernity which emphasized the ‘advancement of humanity,’ ‘individual autonomy’ and ‘an inner moral universe’ (Foulcher and Day 2002; Hooker 2000). Through their songs, the recording artistes contributed to the contemporary discourses about how to move forward and create a more progressive or advanced society, issues which were being debated in the Malay press and other literature by modernist reformist Muslims and Malay nationalists during the 1930s and 1940s in British Malaya and throughout the greater Malay world (Kahn 2006; Milner 1995). At the same time, the musicians were generating their own ‘vernacular modernity,’ one which signified a type of ‘transnational consciousness’ (Hall 2005:557).

I argue that, by using the Malay language instead of English, by incorporating hybrid musical elements and by composing texts about Malay progress, the artistes were creating and communicating a form of Malay cultural nationalism that was not only modern, but also cosmopolitan and inclusive. They were performing a type of local cosmopolitanism which they
experienced as they travelled around and lived in the urban colonial port cities. This local cosmopolitanism was open to the transnational exchange of culture, crossing boundaries of class and ethnicity. It was characterized by what Appiah (1997, 2006) defines as ‘universality plus difference,’ in which people from different locations and faiths interact with mutual consideration. This form of ‘vernacular cosmopolitanism’ was based on cultural difference, multiculturalism, self-advancement and a sense of connection with all humanity through values (Appadurai 2011). In effect, to use Ben Anderson’s term (2012), this mode of colonial cosmopolitanism was ‘rooted’. The musicians did not travel outside of the Malay world but were exposed to and absorbed universal ideas about change which circulated in the region. They used Malay, the local lingua franca, which had no fixed form, and mixed it with other languages to spread their messages. They interacted with Indian, Chinese, Arab and other diasporic people at the port cities where they performed, and mixed Anglo-American music with their own to speak to and attract audiences that were not limited to any one community or nation. This ‘rooted cosmopolitanism’ formed a type of nationalist discourse that differed from the mainstream Malay nationalist narrative which Milner (1995) describes as ‘invented’, which began to essentialize the meaning of Melayu (Malayness), connecting it to a fixed terrain and race (bangsa).

The lagu Melayu was a locus of mediation which drew on many sources: the discourses about nationalism and modernity promoted in the newspapers, literature and radio; the globalized music of Tin Pan Alley, Hollywood and other parts of the world; the commercial concerns and technology of HMV, based in England; and the hybrid cosmopolitan experiences of the musicians and audiences living in the colonial port cities.

Studying the lagu Melayu allows us to go beyond state-dominated histories and to question conventional assumptions about national boundaries and identities. As recent works locating Malaysian history in wider Asian contexts have demonstrated, popular imagination and practices in the early twentieth century were hybrid and not bound by the borders that exist today (Harper and Amrith:2012). The recording industry played a part in spreading colonial modernity, cosmopolitanism and cultural nationalism, with their attendant anxieties and tensions. Using the unconventional textual sources of 78 rpm recordings, film magazines, oral histories, press reports and advertisements of the 1930s and 1940s, this study examines the
musical culture of a period that has shaped much of the modern popular music of Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia.

The Development of Cosmopolitan Port Cities, Nationalism and the Mass Media

Urban Audiences and Discourses on the Way Forward

Gramophone music in Malaya developed in tandem with socio-political transformations resulting from British colonialism in the early twentieth century. Rapid economic development attracted Chinese, Indian and Indonesian immigrants who provided labour for the tin mines, rubber estates and the construction of roads and railways. By the 1930s and 1940s, port cities and towns had been created and an urban multi-ethnic population had emerged. The colonial cities were also inhabited by diverse Malay-speaking Muslims who worked as merchants, traders, religious teachers, journalists and artisans. These Malays travelled throughout the region and recognized themselves as part of a greater Malay world which they referred to as Malaya Raya, Indonesia, Malaya or Nusantara (archipelago). They interacted with other Malays and non-Muslim immigrants using the Malay language as a lingua franca, and formed an emerging cosmopolitan urban middle class (Kahn 2006:174-5). Unlike Furnivall’s ‘plural’ society (1948:446) where different races were said to ‘live side by side, yet without intermingling’, the polyglot multicultural people of the colonial port cities interacted and developed links with one another. They spoke different languages but used Malay as a main language of communication. This multi-ethnic population constituted the audience of the lagu Melayu and the market for the recording industry.

In the two decades before World War II, new ideas about politics, religion, nationalism and the meaning of the Malay bangsa (race) were being formulated and circulated around the Malay archipelago. These ideas

---

5 The Malay-speaking Muslims included the ‘Minangkabau, Mandailing, Kerinci, Achehnese from Sumatra; different groups from the Riau archipelago, Java and Madura; Bugis from the Celebes, Banjar from Borneo; “pure” Malays from the port cities and estuarine towns of British Malaya, Sumatra and Borneo; Kelantanese and people from the Patani district of southern Siam’ (Kahn 2006:174-5).
influenced Malay intellectuals in British Malaya, who initiated nationalist discourses in the vernacular newspapers, literature, cartoons and other public texts about how progress could be achieved in the region and how a more advanced Malay society could be constructed (Milner 1995; Hooker 2000; Mulyadi 2004). While the Malay mainstream nationalists led by vernacular-educated Malays upheld essentialized notions of the Malay bangsa (race), another group of reformist Muslims educated in modern Islamic schools provided an alternative discourse. According to the latter, the inhabitants of the Malay Archipelago constituted a community and formed the Malay bangsa or nation (Kahn 2006:68, 96; Roff 1967). It was the mainstream nationalists with their brand of nationalism defined along racial lines who gained mass support in the post-war period and led Malaya to Independence in 1957.

Although they proposed different ways forward, the various nationalistic discourses all centred on concerns about Malay poverty and backwardness, decolonization, fears that immigrants were taking over the Malay land (Tanah Melayu) and the need for the Malay race (bangsa) to protect its political sovereignty. Debates in the vernacular newspapers, journals, cartoons and new fiction centred on solutions to these problems, the necessity of change and strategies for progress (maju) (Hooker 2000; Khoo 1991; Muliyadi 2004). Education, initiative and the advancement of technology and agriculture were vital if the Malays were to modernize and move forward (Khoo 1991:138, 148). As we will see later in the article, some of these discourses were echoed in the texts of the lagu Melayu of the period.

Urban Entertainment and the Domination of HMV

A variety of non-indigenous cultural activities and commercial theatre (such as European and American operetta, revue and vaudeville, Chinese opera and Parsi theatre) toured the main port cities and bigger towns pro-

---

6 See Milner (1995) for discussions of the various intellectual debates in Malay public texts in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He shows ideological differences by distinguishing keywords and concepts in their discourses in the public documents.

7 According to Kahn (2006:21), the modernist Islamic reformists comprised mainly Minangkabau and peninsular Malays who were influenced by Arab nationalism and radical Islamic thought in Cairo’s Al-Azhar University in Egypt. They called themselves the Kaum Muda (new group) in order to set themselves apart from an older generation (Kaum Tua) who were closer to Islam from Mecca.
viding entertainment for the multi-ethnic urban population. Local commercial operatic genres, such as bangsawan or Malay opera, also developed in the urban areas (Tan 1993). At the same time a new commodified urban media culture emerged from the convergence of print, gramophone, radio, film and theatre to entertain multi-ethnic audiences from different social and class backgrounds. The lagu Melayu recorded for gramophone was part of this new media culture.

Recording companies active in pre-World War II British Malaya and the Dutch East Indies included GC, Beka, Odeon, Columbia (US), Columbia Graphophone Company (UK), Hindenburg, Pagoda, Polyphon, Polydor, Lyrophon, Pathe, Tio Tek Hong, Canary, Tjap Angsa, Delima, Yokimtjan, Telefunken, Anken, Chap Kuching and Chap Singa.8 Recordings of performers from British Malaya were sold in the Dutch East Indies, and vice versa. For British Malaya, recording locations and orchestras were in Singapore, and most performers lived in or travelled to Singapore to make recordings. As I have shown in an earlier article, recording engineers were assisted by local agents who selected artistes, repertoire and venues for recording. Recording was done on hard wax and the wax matrices were sent to the factories of the various companies to be pressed. For GC, wax matrices were pressed in Hanover until 1907. From 1908, GC records were produced at the company’s own factory at Calcutta. The finished records were then shipped back to Malaya to be sold by sole agents appointed by the company (Tan 1996/97).

GC was the largest producer of Malay recordings and dominated record production in British Malaya both before and after World War I. Following Yampolsky’s estimates (2010b), GC manufactured about 61 per cent of all Malay recordings in Malaysia between 1903 and 1942. Unlike other companies, which suspended production during the War due to shipping problems, GC’s recording engineer, Dillnutt, continued recording through 1916 and 1917. Production could be sustained because the records were manufactured in India and did not have to be shipped to Europe (Yampolsky 2010a:185). After 1931, when the major European recording companies

---

8 See Yampolsky (2010a and 2010b), Gronow (1981) and Tan (1996/97) for descriptions of the different recording companies and labels in the first half of the twentieth century. It should be noted that Pagoda, Hindenburg, Polydor, and Polyphon were not separate companies.
merged to form the Electric and Musical Industries Ltd (EMI),\(^9\) HMV continued to overshadow the other recording companies in Malaya. The EMI companies included GC, Columbia, Carl Lindstrom (Beka, Odeon, Parlophone)—which had been bought by Columbia (UK) in 1925—and Pathe—bought by Columbia in 1928. Although the subsidiary companies of EMI functioned independently and continued to use their own names, labels and agents in Malaya, their recordings were all made by GC engineers in the GC recording studio at Cairnhill Road, Singapore. The records of most of the companies belonging to EMI were pressed at the GC factory at Dum Dum (EMI India), though some Chinese records were produced at the Pathe-EMI factory in Shanghai (Jones 2001:62).

By the 1930s, GC was allowing local dealers to start their own companies such as Chap Kuching (Cat Label, Figure 2) and Chap Singa (Lion Label). Chap Kuching was founded in 1934 by S. Moutrie & Co., a Singapore agent of HMV, while Chap Singa was established in 1937 by T. Hemsley, a former manager of S. Moutrie & Co. Although these sister companies had their own management and controlled their own finances, their singers were recorded at the GC studios by HMV engineers and their records pressed at the GC factory in India. In an article published in the *Straits Echo* (24 May 1934) entitled ‘Malay songs and pantuns on the gramophone, famous opera stars sing for Singapore Moutrie & Co. Ltd’, the author of the article, who had witnessed the making of the Chap Kuching records, confirmed that recording was carried out at the HMV studio at Cairnhill Road, Singapore. He wrote that the singers, Tijah and Dean, were accompanied by ‘Mr Martinez and his excellent orchestra’, and that ‘Mr. F.A. Floyd, the expert recorder of Malay songs and music very kindly explained… the mechanism and the processes of production of the records’:

As each recording was finished and passed the close examination of Mr. Floyd, the wax mould was put in a receptacle and labeled. All the finished wax moulds will be sent to India to receive the finishing touches… On an average, from fifteen to twenty recordings can be done in a day… The records will be obtainable only from Moutrie’s and from the establishment’s holding agencies through them (*Straits Echo*, 24 May 1934).

---

\(^9\) The merger was motivated by the loss of profits following the recession and stock market crash in 1929. As a result, competition among the EMI companies was eliminated. See Gronow (1981) for further discussion on the merger.
Figure 1. HMV (Chap Anjing or Dog label)

Figure 2. Chap Kuching (Cat Label)
Chap Singa and Chap Kuching closed prior to the Japanese occupation of Malaya, and their recordings were reissued by HMV after the War. The songs of Chap Singa artistes (such as Ahmad CB, Che Dinah, Che Amelia and Jan) and Chap Kuching stars (such as Che Tijah, Che Saemah and Che Naemah) appeared in the post-war June 1947 HMV catalogue along with reissues of other pre-war HMV records. Through the system of sister companies, GC became the biggest recording company operating and controlled all record production in Malaya prior to World War II.

‘His Master’s Voice’ Disseminated and Consumed in New Spaces by Diverse Audiences

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, the impact of the gramophone and the number of recordings made was small. Recording ‘expeditions’ by GC were also infrequent. The rich in urban areas, who could afford to buy a gramophone player and discs, included British officers, plantation and tin mine owners, Malay aristocrats, and well-to-do local born Chinese and Indian Muslims. Nevertheless, the local subsidiaries and dealers of GC made concerted efforts to disseminate 78 rpm records more widely in the towns of Malaya, especially in the 1930s. Even though the number of records made was small and the record-playing technology remained expensive, more people, including the poorer classes, gained access to gramophone music as HMV dealers and agents created public spaces where records could be played and amplified, organized live performances featuring recording artistes, and used the mass media such as radio, catalogues and the press to publicize the new records.

New Public Spaces and Amplification

Unlike indigenous music, which was performed as part of community festivals or rituals, the new gramophone music recorded by HMV and its sister companies in the 1930s and early 1940s was played in new urban public spaces such as shops, streets, amusement parks, dance halls, song stages, and...
bangsawan theatres and cinemas. These public spaces created bigger and diverse audiences for recorded music and promoted a new type of musical consumption very different from live performances.

Amusement parks set up by transnational Chinese companies like the Shaw Brothers played a major role in disseminating gramophone music to large audiences. These parks provided entertainment in the form of bangsawan performances, dance halls, Chinese opera, movies, boxing and game stalls, and were widely accessible, even to the working class, costing only 10 cents to enter.\(^{11}\) Gramophone music was played at the amusement parks throughout the night for all to hear. It was reported that a ‘portable gramophone…play[ing] Chap Kuching records’ was placed at the entrance to the theatre at Great World (The Malaya Tribune, 11 July 1934).

Live performances called pentas nyanyian (song stage) featuring songs sung by the artistes who recorded them were often held at the parks, especially before the screening of talkies. At one such event several HMV recording artistes including ‘S. Abdullah, Celebrated Singer and Kronchong Artiste’, ‘Miss Tarminah (Semarang), HMV Recording Artiste’ and ‘Miss Amelia (Bandoeng), Reputable Kronchong Singer of Chap Singer [sic]’ were scheduled to sing in the Fun and Frolic Stadium in Singapore on 5, 6 and 7 August (Sunday Gazette, 31 July 1938). On another occasion, at the Coronation Talkies in Kulim, Kedah, Ahmad C.B., with other Chap Singa recording artistes Dinah, Doli, Amelia and Jan, ‘sang their latest song hits including [the] song of [our] country, “Malaya”, written and composed by Ahmad C.B., Chap Singa’s staff’ (Sunday Gazette, 26 March 1939).

At the parks, HMV and its sister companies also organized kronchong competitions to publicize their best performers. Ahmad CB’s Kronchong Party held an ‘amateur kronchong competition’ at the Coronation Talkies in Kulim, Kedah, where ‘3 handsome cups’ were awarded (Sunday Gazette, 26 March 1939). In late 1941, the Utusan Zaman (2 December 1941) informed readers about a Kronchong Chap Singa and Chap Anjing competition organized by the Chap Singa and Chap Anjing recording companies, which featured ‘almost all the famous singers and bands in Malaya’. Miss Ayana, Miss Delia, Miss Tarminah, and Miss Aminah would sing at the stadium of

\(^{11}\) See Wong and Tan (2004) and van der Putten (2010) for descriptions of the three amusement parks in Singapore (New World, Great World and Happy World). The amusement parks exemplified ‘the modern patterns of consumption and commodification of entertainment such as music, dance and theatre’ (van der Putten 2010:19).
the Happy World amusement park. These competitions were also venues for new talent to perform. HMV talent scouts, such as Zubir Said, attended these competitions to look for new singers (personal communication, Ahmad CB, 1986).

HMV and its sister companies often launched their new discs with performances by the main artistes at opera performances at amusement parks. In 1934, S. Moutrie and Co. Ltd invited ‘a large number of people of all nationalities’ to attend ‘the Dean’s Grand Opera at the Great World’ at which its newly arrived Chap Kuching records would be introduced to the public. The company featured ‘The “Big Four” of the Malay bangsawan: Mr. K. Dean, his wife, Wan Tijah . . . a descendant of one of the Rajahs of Pontianak; her elder sister, Saimah; and Miss Maimoon, who . . . recorded for . . . Chap Kuching’. They sang a dondang sayang entitled Ma’Enang and Hung Tuah in addition to a ‘large number of extra turns, most of the songs being actual reproductions of those in the records’ (The Malaya Tribune, 11 July 1934).

Live performances by recording artistes were also held at cinemas prior to screenings, and free gifts were given out to encourage audiences to purchase records. The Straits Echo reported one such event, at which Chap Singa stars Miss Dinah (‘twice champion kronchong singer of Singapore’), Miss Amelia (‘pride of Java’) and Ahmad CB (whose rendering of Kacang Goreng (Fried Peanuts) was very well ‘received’) were ‘hits with the audience’ when they performed at the Majestic Theatre before the screening of the film Follow Your Heart in 1938. It was further reported that ‘lovers of kronchong music had a rare treat at the Majestic last night’ when the well-known Chap Singa artistes gave a successful performance ‘before an enthusiastic audience’. As part of the promotion, free merchandise including ‘Chap singa pencils’ was also ‘given away at the theatre’ (Straits Echo, 26 March 1938).

Loudspeakers in public spaces contributed to the spread of gramophone music to a broader audience, especially to those who could not afford to buy records. In the early 1930s, newspapers reported that gramophone music played over the radio was amplified in public places, especially outside

---

12 ‘Gelanggang peraduan Kronchong Cap Singa dan Cap Anjing’ yang ‘dikelolakan oleh syarikat-syarikat mengeluarkan piring peti nyanyi Cap Singa dan Cap Anjing’ dan ‘hampir semua sekali penyanyi-penyanyi yang masyhur di Malaya serta dengan bunyi-bunyian pancaragam. Mereka itu akan diadakan di gelanggang stadium Taman Hiburan Happy World—Miss Ayana, Miss Delia, Miss Tarminah dan Miss Aminah’, Utusan Zaman, 2 December 1941.
shops (Straits Times, 20 February 1934). HMV agents Robinson & Co. Ltd advertised various types of loudspeakers alongside cheaper gramophone players in local newspapers (Straits Times, July 26 1933). Gramophone music was heard at all hours of the day in urban areas such as Penang and Singapore, giving rise in mid-1934 to a debate on the ‘noise’ created. The Malay newspaper Bumiputera (14 July 1934) criticized those who played their gramophones during the Muslim prayer hours and reported that ‘in our Singapore suburbs, with their open houses and different nationalities, the gramophone, especially the electrical type, can be a very real nuisance’. These complaints led the Singapore Legislative Council to pass an amendment to the Minor Offences Ordinance in 1934 prohibiting the playing of ‘gramophone and wireless loudspeakers after midnight unless there was written permission from the police’ (Straits Times, 16 and 17 February 1934). This amendment led in turn to protests from gramophone enthusiasts, which were also reported in the press. They claimed that the amendment ‘was rushed through the Council without giving the public an opportunity to study [it]’. There was ‘a strong feeling that the absolute prohibition of gramophone and wireless music after midnight, with no saving clauses of any kind, [was] unreasonable’ (Straits Times, 17 February 1934).

Publicity and Marketing through the Press and HMV Catalogues

To keep their audience up to date and to entice consumers to buy new records, HMV printed publicity materials, including catalogues, and advertised new discs in the newspapers and magazines. These publicity materials reveal the marketing strategies of HMV, information on their customers and trends in the popularity of gramophone machines and records.

The increase in the 1920s in advertisements for new European and Malay records, and gramophone machines to play them, in the English-language newspapers—such as the Straits Times, Malay Mail, Sunday Gazette and Straits Echo—indicates that the gramophone’s popularity extended to the local upper and middle classes who could read English as well as to Europeans. In the 1930s, attempts were made to reach out to more of the diverse population of the urban areas. Malay-language papers such as Majlis, Warta Malaya and the weekly periodical Saudara,13 which catered

13 Majlis was started in Kuala Lumpur in 1931 by Mohd Amin Mohd Yusoff, a Malay businessman. Its first editor, Abdul Rahim Kajai, advocated the progress and causes of the
to urban Malays who could read the Jawi script, began to run advertisements for Malay records, principally those released by HMV and its sister companies, as well as advertisements for cheaper portable gramophone players.

HMV gramophone catalogues of the 1930s began to provide commercial notes such as the descriptions of singers, information about new records, letters from consumers, and the lyrics of songs in romanized Malay (Rumi). These were an addition to the song titles and names of performers already published in Jawi and Rumi in earlier catalogues. The provision of notes and Rumi lyrics helped to broaden the circulation of the catalogues, especially to the Chinese Peranakan, who were ardent fans of bangsawan and Malay social music and dance, and to other Malays from the archipelago and urban audiences unfamiliar with Jawi. To cater to the Peranakan, the 1934 HMV catalogue included the lyrics of lagu extra turn and lagu bahrul (new songs), such as Sang-hai Street, Chek Abang (Mr Brother), Kembangan China (Blossoming of a Chinese [Girl]), Bunga Mawarr (Mawarr Flower) and Soridam Manis (Sweet Soridam). The lyrics of the same songs were also published in the Peranakan magazine Sri Peranakan (1932).

To further appeal to potential customers, commercial advertisements in catalogues in the 1930s declared that the HMV singers, music, recordings, gramophone machines and needles were of the best quality, better than those of other labels. Key phrases emphasizing quality are found repeatedly in record catalogues, for example, ‘clearer sound, a more appealing model, equipment that is stronger and more enduring, as compared to other labels’.

Malays. Warta Malaya was owned in 1930 by the rich Arab Al Sagoff family of Singapore. It urged Malays to protect their rights through associations, criticized Malay ‘backwardness’ and promoted education as a ‘way forward,’ Saudara was a weekly periodical started by Syed Syekh al-Hadi, the Muslim reformer, teacher and writer (Roff 1967).

14 Although advertisements for Columbia, Pathe (Chap Ayam), Pagoda, Hindenburg and Tio Tek Hong Malay records appeared in English and Malay papers in the 1930s and early 1940s, advertisements for HMV records predominated.

15 Van der Putten (2010) shows that advertisements for the various types of gramophones, including portable ones, and for Malay recordings appeared in the Malay newspapers (such as Majlis) in the early 1930s, targeting Malays who read the Jawi script. These advertisements (and those for other consumer goods from other companies) in the Malay press targeted consumers in the Malay community. Despite the economic recession, the Malay papers stressed consumerism. Earlier newspapers, such as Al-Imam (9 March 1908), had advertised records of Quran reading, European bands and Middle Eastern songs.
(HMV catalogue, July 1934), and ‘His Master’s Voice needles do not spoil the records’ (HMV catalogue, January 1933). In the 1930s, advertisements emphasized the enhancement of sound quality with the introduction of electrical recording. The 1931 HMV catalogue stated that the records were of the highest quality as they were ‘sung by HMV-Chap Anjing singers and recorded clearly by electric equipment and apparatus’ (HMV catalogue, 1931). Additionally, dealers such as Robinson & Co., Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, regularly advertised ‘HMV products of Outstanding Merit’, for example, portable gramophones (model 97) $35.00, radio gramophones and acoustic table grands (Straits Times, 26 July 1933).

HMV and its sister companies also made it known that they did not risk recording unknown performers. Only the best were recorded and re-recorded. They were either famous bangsawan performers such as Miss Norlia, Miss Julia, Miss Tijah and Mr K. Dean, or they were winners of competitions organized by the recording companies. The Straits Echo reported that Miss Dinah was recorded by Chap Singa because she had won the kronchong competition twice (Straits Echo, 30 March 1938). ‘Only performers who are praised by audiences, who can truly attract and entertain listeners, are selected for recording by Chap Anjing, HMV’ (HMV catalogue, March 1933). In its newspaper advertisements, Chap Kuching proclaimed the quality of their singers: ‘Naturally, people buy and keep these [Chap Kuching] records because the singers are good Malay singers who are the most famous in the peninsula’ (Saudara, 3 November 1934). The advertisement for the third issue of Chap Kuching records (The Malaya Tribune, 15 January 1935) stressed that ‘the popularity of Kuching records is due to the fact that only the finest exponents of the Malay Bangsawan are recorded by

16 Suara lebih terang, model lebih manis, perkakas lebih kuat, tanggong lebih jempol, dari lain-lain chap (HMV catalogue, July 1934).
17 Jarum His Master’s Voice Yang tida merusak-kan Piring.
18 Dinyanyi-kan oleh Ahli-ahli Penyanyi ‘His Master’s Voice—Chap Anjing’ ia-lah diam-bil dengan terang oleh perkakas dan pesawat electric.
19 penyanyi yang telah mendapat kepujian daripada orang-orang ramai yang dia itu amat benar menarek dan menyuka-kan hati pendengar-pendengar nya . . . maka baharulah penyanyi yang sedemikian itu dipilih . . . Lalu ditebitkan suaranya dipiring peti menyanyi Chap Anjing ‘HMV’ (HMV catalogue, March 1933).
20 Sepatutnyalah tuan-tuan membeli dan menyimpan piring-piring yang tersebut . . . kerana ahli-ahli menyanyi . . . ialah pandai-pandai nyanyi bangsa Melayu terkenal sekali dalam semenanjung ini (Saudara, 3 November 1934).
Kuching records. No matter which Kuching record you purchase, you can be confident you are getting the best of its type.’

GC also tried to attract customers by highlighting novelty and variety in its catalogues and advertisements: ‘New singers, new orchestras, new songs, new arrangements . . . our new Star Artistes (Singers) from overseas, [who] sing all kinds of kronchong songs, Malay songs, Batak songs, Acheh songs and other songs.’21 Children were also promoted as a novelty. The HMV supplement for October 1939 published a photograph of ‘Miss Emma Carnegie, sweetheart of the cabaret and radio in Singapore, who is 9 years old’, and drew attention to the Malay songs she sang, including Mama oh Mama-foxtrot and Soeka-soeka Hati-foxtrot (Happy Foxtrot) (P. 13194).22

The Making of Recording Stars

HMV also made the most of the popularity of bangsawan stars in their catalogues and newspaper advertisements. Print publications presented the performers as leading media personalities by prefacing their names with titles such as Mr (Encik) or Miss (Che). These publications used the attractions of the singers themselves, especially the female singers, to woo consumers by printing their photographs with captions such as ‘Che Norlia [of the] Sri Panggung City Opera of Singapore. Che Norlia’s voice and singing can only be heard on HMV recordings’23 (Saudara, 26 October 1932), or ‘Records sung by the famous Malay prima donnas’ (HMV catalogue, November 1934, Figure 3).24 Record catalogues sought to attract male fans


23 ‘Che Norlia Sri Panggung City Opera of Singapura. Che Norlia punya suara dan nyanyi tidak boleh dapat di lain piring melainkan HMV sahaja’ (Saudara, 26 October 1932).

24 ‘Record yang di-nyanyi-kan oleh Sri-sri Panggong Malayu yang Mashoor’ (HMV catalogue, November 1934). It should be noted that the recordings helped improve the status of female bangsawan performers whom some Muslim conservatives frowned on because they felt that these women were exhibiting themselves on stage. But the recordings separated the music from the performances and lives of the women performers.
Figure 3. HMV catalogue, November 1934, showing the photograph of Che Norlia.
with reassuring words, for example ‘Brothers do not fret, do not miss hearing the voice of Nancy, buy her records at HMV shops’ (HMV catalogue, November 1934).\(^{25}\)

In a similar way, the popularity of singers was used to promote their record companies. Descriptions such as ‘HMV recording artiste’ or ‘of Chap Singa fame’ were often added to the names of bangsawan performers in newspaper advertisements to create publicity for the record companies (\textit{Sunday Gazette}, 31 July 1938) as well as for the singers. Stars were also identified in publicity materials by the songs they were famous for, the prizes they had won, the quality of their voices or their young age. The \textit{Straits Echo} (26 March 1938) characterized Ahmad CB as ‘Twice Malayan champion…famous for his Kachang Goreng [Fried Peanuts]’ song; Miss Dinah as ‘Twice Lady Champion’, also known as ‘the girl with the golden voice’; Miss Amelia as ‘our dainty Java star, her Ali Baba Rumba has set all Singapore whistling this jolly song’; and Doli as ‘our clever orchestral leader and vocaliser, his voice is as sweet as the music’.

By the 1930s, the recording industry, dominated by HMV, had transformed Malay folk and theatrical music into mass-mediated popular music that was commodified and consumed by multi-ethnic urban audiences. To maintain control of production and sales, HMV actively publicized its records and stars through the radio, printed newspapers, and catalogues. Recorded music was disseminated to large audiences, played at amusement parks, shops, talkies, live bangsawan, ronggeng and keronchong shows, and singing competitions. The music was so popular that it was performed live by amateur musical groups, brass bands, film orchestras and street musicians of various ethnic backgrounds in all parts of the towns and at all hours (\textit{Chahaya Timur}, 11 January 1930). By the 1930s, gramophone music had become part of public life in the main towns of British Malaya. It had crossed over into other media, and was available to a wide public which cut across the boundaries of race, class and gender.

\(^{25}\) ‘Jangan lah abang merisaukan hati; Menghilangkan rindu dengar suara Nancy Beli pingnya di toko la H.M.V’ (HMV catalogue, November 1934).
Singing Back to ‘His Master’s Voice’: Hybridity, Cosmopolitanism and Modernity

What was the style and content of the new lagu Melayu? Music from the Malay opera or bangsawan was the basis of the lagu Melayu recorded by HMV before World War II. For example, the March 1933 HMV catalogue invited audiences to buy ‘HMV gramophone records that play[s] s’loka [seloka] and gurindam songs from the play Raja Laksamana Bentan for the first time,’26 and the August 1936 catalogue exhorted readers to ‘listen to Che Norlia’s Story of Dan-Dan Stia, on Records P. 12901 to P. 12904’.27

Lagu extra turn, which were originally performed between acts in the Malay bangsawan, were also recorded. According to the April 1933 HMV catalogue, ‘hundreds of letters were received from Chap Anjing HMV customers requesting the company to produce records of lagu keronchong or variety shows called “Extra Turn” . . . which followed the themes of stories such as the English Opera “Dollar Princess”, the Hindustani “Indra Sabha”, and the Malay Arbab Dramatic Arts ‘Chatra Petri Gunong Ledang’ . . . In response to these requests, HMV printed a ‘Special Section on Extra Turns’ in the same catalogue advertising songs such as Kaseyan Tuan (Love of Sir) and Masri Sarawak by Miss Nancy and D. Lincoln’s Orchestra.

With the growth of the mass media and increase in new spaces where recorded music could be heard, bangsawan stars and musicians were exposed to recordings of diverse Malay folk and theatre songs, as well as various types of Anglo-American, Chinese, Indian and Middle Eastern music. This exposure to different forms of music led to syncretism, cosmopolitanism, change and modernity. As the next two sections show, HMV recordings became a counter-discourse to Anglo-American pop and were

26 ‘Piring peti menyanyi ‘HMV’ yang pertama kali mengeluarkan lagu-lagu s’loka dan Gurindam yang terkandong dalam lakuan ‘Raja Laksamana Bentan’ (HMV catalogue, March 1933). Seloka and gurindam are different types of Malay verses.
27 ‘Dengarlah Che Norlia punya Cherita Dan-Dan Stia’; Piring P. 12901 sampai P. 12904’ (HMV catalogue, August 1936).
a means for the spread of a broader definition of nationalist culturalism in the Malay world.

**Popular Music Derived from Malay Folk Music**

A large part of the recorded *bangsawan* repertoire of the pre-World War II period was derived from Malay folk social dance music (*ronggeng*) such as *asli*, *inang*, *joget* and *zapin*. Other forms of social music recorded included the *dondang sayang*, *kronchong* and various types of music with *gambos* accompaniment. Many of these social dance genres were performed at social occasions such as weddings and other festivities in various parts of Malaya. They were adapted by the commercial urban *bangsawan* theatre, and performed in the stories and extra turns.\(^{29}\)

Through the gramophone, social folk music evolved into modern popular genres. In order to attract multi-ethnic urban audiences, new musical arrangements and melodies were composed. In the 1930s, the *bangsawan* musicians altered the folk *ronggeng* ensemble (comprising a violin, accordion, 2 *rebana* frame drums and a gong) by replacing some of the instruments. A piano was often substituted for the accordion, while the Western drum set was used in place of the frame drum. Sometimes the ensemble was supplemented with a plucked bass and extra violins. The new *ronggeng* ensemble was influenced by the Tin Pan Alley music of the gramophone and the Hollywood talkie. The emphasis was on memorable melodies, and the musical renditions were limited to three minutes per side of a record.

Despite their transcultural influences, the recorded songs retained Malay elements. The new arrangements used the form of the Malay *pantun*\(^{30}\)

---

29 See Tan (1993) and Matusky and Tan (2004) for analyses of *bangsawan* songs and Malay social dance music. In *bangsawan*, slow-paced *asli* songs were often sung as *lagu nasib* [song of fate] or *lagu sedih* [sad song] to accompany characters who were in extreme sorrow. Fast-paced *asli* accompanied dances and happier songs. *Inang* became associated with lighter dramatic situations such as lovers and dancers in the garden. *Joget* songs accompanied fighting scenes. *Zapin* (sometimes called *gambus*) songs were performed during sad scenes or to accompany dance. All four genres were popular in the extra turns.

30 Many of the *asli*, *inang* and *joget* recorded songs had texts which corresponded to *pantun* subjects such as *kasih* (love), *kanak-kanak* (children), *nasihat* (advice), *budi* (good deeds), *agama* (religion), *jenaka* (comedy), *sindiran* (scorn), *teka-teki* (riddles) and *nasib* (fate). HMV catalogues used these categories to differentiate the songs.
and were sung to various *ronggeng* rhythms. The singers used the nasal Malay singing style with a fairly narrow and tense vocal width. *Linggang Mak Inang* (Che Norlia, HMV, 1930s) exemplified this new style. It was accompanied by a violin, piano, and Malay frame drum (*rebana*). The drum and the bass part of the piano played the characteristic *inang* rhythmic pattern, while the violin and the treble piano part performed in heterophony (improvising on a similar melody) with the voice. Although vertical triads were created by the piano, the vocal and instrumental lines remained fairly independent.

In addition to the Malay and Anglo-American elements, other foreign elements were often added to the recorded *bangsawan* and folk songs of the 1930s and early 1940s. *Anak Tiong* (Chinese Child) was an *asli* song from the *ronggeng* repertoire which used a mode similar to the Javanese *pelog pathet nem* (Miss Tijah, Chap Kuching, NG 5, 1930s). *Tandi Tandi* (Che Tijah, HMV, P. 16489, 1930s) showed Indian influence, and was accompanied by a harmonium, *tabla* and piano. The inclusion of a short, unmetered introduction (*alap*) by the harmonium, and vocal ornamentations (such as slides between notes and vibrato in melismatic phrases) linked the song to Indian folk and light classical singing. *Gambos Betjerai Kasih* (Gambos Separation of Lovers) (Ahmad CB, Chap Singa QF 105, 1939) was a *bangsawan* song accompanied by a Middle Eastern *ud* called a *gambus*, accordion, violin and double bass. The characteristic 4-beat *zapin* rhythm maintained by the *gambus* and the small *marwas* hand drums, continuous plucking of the *gambus* strings, and the Arabic mode gave the song a Middle Eastern flavour.

**Popular Music Derived from Anglo-American Popular Music**

The other part of the HMV recorded repertoire of the 1930s and early 1940s consisted of popular music based on Anglo-American and Latin American social dance music which were sung in Malay. Music for dances such as the waltz, tango, foxtrot and rumba were originally performed by dance bands at the British clubs, but were later adopted by local bands in the *bangsawan* extra turns and at cabaret dance halls in the amusement parks. The new dance music and rhythms appealed to consumers as they were ‘up to date’ and resembled the trendy Anglo-American pop music in European and American films. Some examples include *Tora Rumba* (P. 16299,
Che Wantora, HMV catalogue, July 1934), *Tango Du Rose* (P. 12905, Che Ainon and Kassim’s Orchestra, HMV catalogue, September 1936) and *Ainon Blues* (P. 12890, Che Ainon and Kassim’s Orchestra, HMV catalogue, July 1936). Marches, comic songs (*lagu klakar*) and Hawaiian songs were also recorded.

Malay popular songs derived from pre-World War II Anglo-American pop were accompanied by ensemble known as *orkestra Melayu* (Malay orchestra), which also played at *bangsawan* performances, cabarets, hotels, silent films, wedding parties and funerals. These orchestras were adapted from the Anglo-American dance bands and orchestras of visiting theatrical troupes, which also resembled Tin Pan Alley ensembles. By the 1930s, a typical *orkestra Melayu* consisted of violin, trumpet, trombone, flute, clarinet, piano, double bass, guitar and drums, but new instruments were constantly being incorporated. With the rising popularity of Hawaiian-style dance music in the 1930s, the Hawaiian guitar and ukulele were added. As new jazz sounds gained currency, the saxophone was quickly absorbed. Following a growing interest in Latin American dance rhythms (such as the rumba and tango), Latin American percussion instruments (maracas, claves, woodblock, and so on) were included.

A typical example of this was *Lapaloma Merpati* (The Dove) (Miss Maimon, Chap Kuching, NG 24, 1930s), a variation of the song *La Paloma*, which was first composed by the Spanish composer Sebastian Iradier in the late nineteenth century. The melody became so popular that it was adapted with new lyrics in Mexico, Germany, France and various other parts of the world and appeared in many early-twentieth-century talkies. In the Chap Kuching recording, Malay texts were set to the well-known melody and accompanied by Western instruments, specifically piano, trumpet, plucked bass and castanets. A type of homophony was used in which one singer sang the melody with the melodic instruments (piano and trumpet) while the second singer harmonized in thirds and sixths with the main voice, forming triads with the bass of the piano and plucked bass. The Latin American

---

31 See Tan (1993:chap. 5) for a description of the origins of the *orkestra Melayu*. The number of instruments used for a performance depended on the availability of musicians. The *orkestra Melayu* was the forerunner of the Orkes RTM (Radio and Television Malaysia Orchestra), the main ensemble which performs instrumental music and accompanies singers on RTM.
tango rhythm was played by the maracas and castanets. The song used the strophic form, consisting of verses and repeated choruses.

Gramophone music, particularly that derived from Anglo-American pop, exhibited a degree of stylistic regularity in instrumentation and format. As Tin Pan Alley instrumentation formed most of the studio orchestration, western instruments were used together with local ones to accompany ronggeng music. There was a tendency to compress lengthy improvisations into three minute formats. Some singers began to switch to the open-throated crooning style of singing associated with Anglo-American popular music. The new instruments, strophic structure, dance rhythms and crooning style of singing were considered modern. However, the new pop songs achieved commercial appeal without losing their folk foundation. The fusion of Malay social dance rhythms, musical textures, singing styles, drums, and other foreign elements led to a vernacular modernity which decentred the dominant Anglo-American pop and appealed to audiences of diverse ethnic backgrounds. The hybrid lagu Melayu represented a broad and open definition of Malayness and the Malay bangsa and communicated this broad view to the people of the wider Malay world.

**Topical Texts and Social Commentary**

Recorded songs by HMV, Chap Singa and Chap Kuching not only entertained but also helped in educating, modernizing and raising the consciousness of the Malays. Through their lyrics, musicians engaged with the ideas of reform and progress which flowed through the Malay world in the 1930s and early 1940s. To catch the attention of listeners, and to sound modern, these lyrics were often sung to catchy melodies superimposed on upbeat dance rhythms such as the waltz, foxtrot, tango, and rumba. Popular film melodies were often adapted as well.

*Moving Forward through Education, Reformist Modern Islam and Moral Guidance*

As mentioned earlier, Malay nationalists of differing ideologies were concerned about poverty, backwardness and the threat posed by ‘other’ non-Malay immigrants, and they debated how Malay society could best progress. Similarly, songs of recording artistes of the period were discourses
on ways for Malay society to move forward or advance. For example, Che Eulis (Bicara Gampang, Berbuat Susah (Easy to Discuss, Difficult to Do), NS 591, HMV catalogue, September 1939) emphasized that ‘As long as you are alive, you have to move forward’ (Kalau misi ada penghidupan, Musti choba maju kedepan).

Education was continually emphasized as an important instrument for individual progress and a remedy for Malay backwardness. Newspapers such as the Jawi Peranakan (first published in 1876) and Warta Malaya (1936) stressed the importance of education as a way to progress and move forward. Al-Imam (1906) urged Malays to ‘wake from their slumber,’ to work hard, change their behavior, and be active in education, trade, agriculture and the development of the community (Hooker 2000:chap. 2; Roff 1967).

In tandem with such discourses, the HMV and Chap Singa singer, Ahmad CB, called on audiences to ‘wake up from sleep’ and to ‘study’. In an interview with the author, Ahmad CB stressed that as he ‘travelled from island to island . . . while earning a living, he was educating the young . . . [and] . . . educating the community so that they could move forward’. He declared that his performance group staged many songs and stories that called on children to ‘wake up’ (bangun anak-anak). He sang the following song to me, which he had recorded with Chap Singa (personal communication, Ahmad CB, 1986):

**Bangun Anakku** (Wake up My Child) (Ahmad CB, Chap Singa, 1938)

Bangun anakku dari tidurmu / semua kawan-kawanmu sudah menunggu / jikalaunya sudah, segera berpakaian / menuntut ilmu, jangan-jangan dilupakan / ini semua demi masa depan.

Wake up my child from your sleep / all your friends are waiting / if you have woken up, quickly get dressed / pursue knowledge, do not forget / all this is for the future.

Recording artistes also sang about the way forward proposed by modernist Islamic reformists. In her analysis of Malay prose fiction, Hooker (2000:5, 85) shows that for the new generation of modernist reformists, the ‘way

32 Even though records with the NS prefix were Dutch East Indies recordings, they were included in the HMV catalogues of Malaya.
33 ‘pulau ke pulau jalan sambil cari makan sambil kita bimbingan anak-anak, bimbing masyarakat supaya boleh maju sikit’ (personal communication, Ahmad CB, 1986).
forward’ was through ‘individual initiative’ and moral values such as kemanusiaan (humanity), kemajuan (progress), hak perempuan (women’s rights), kewajiban (responsibilities), and setia (steadfastness). There was a real desire at the time for moral guidance and advice about how to progress.

Along with this thirst for moral advice, there was a considerable increase in song texts about virtuous behaviour through the 1930s, as if to convince listeners to change for the better. Keywords pertaining to values which were used in the new Malay prose were often used in the HMV advertisements, catalogues and song lyrics. Showing sympathy (belas kasihan) to the less fortunate and women, and generosity to the needy, were often presented in recorded songs. HMV record catalogues exploited the mood for moral guidance by advertising ‘poems that were meaningful and beneficial’ (pantun-pantun yang berarti dan berfaedah) (HMV catalogue, July 1937).

The song Kesian (Pity) (Che Aminah, HMV, P. 13186, lagu Melayu) advised audiences to pity and help the poor:

Orang kaya bersuka-suka / Membuang wang tiada berhingga / Kesian miskin apakah daya / Tiada makan tiada blanja.

Rich people like to enjoy themselves / Waste their money endlessly / Pity the poor who do not have the means / Who have no money even for food.

Che Wantora urged listeners not to idolize people who have money in Ingat-Ingat (Remember) (HMV, P. 16308, lagu extra turn):

Banyak orang zaman sekarang / Dia suka memandang wang.

Many people today / Like to idolize those who have money.

Songs about the fate (nasib) of the unfortunate in society were also recorded to arouse compassion in listeners. Yatim Piatu (Orphans) was a sad song by Mohd. Yatim which described the lives of orphans (HMV, P. 13187):

34 For example, Syed Syekh al-Hadi, a teacher, journalist, and writer who was inspired by reformist Islam from Egypt, wrote a series of stories called The Moral Trainer that was published by the Jelutong Press. He advocated morals and values (which included concern for people, responsibility, fidelity, initiative, and education for women) in stories such as Faridah Hanum (Hooker 2000:85).
Kalau waktu malam Jum`at petang khamis / Berlinanglah ayer mataku menangis / Terbayang arwah ibu bapaku yang mati / Aku tinggal saorang diri.

The eve of Friday / Tears flow from my eyes as I cry / [I see] The shadow of my parents who have died / I am living by myself.

In *Kawin Paksaan* (Forced Marriage) (HMV, NS 587, *kronchong foxtrot*), Miss Jacoba Regar expressed her sympathy for women who were forced to marry rich men chosen for them by their parents:

*Karena dengar cherita kawan / Kau dinikahkan kepada saorang hartawan / Kau dipaksa tidak dapat melawan / Laksana budak kena ditawan.*

I hear from a friend / You were married to a rich man / You were forced without being able to oppose / Like a child who is held captive.

**Comic Songs about Common People: Speaking a Language of Inclusion**

New types of comic songs began to appear in the recorded repertoire of HMV and its subsidiaries in British Malaya in the 1930s. As the accompanying examples show, these songs often did not use *pantun* verses. They explored topical issues, such as the plight of taxi drivers and trishaw men, and included comments on poverty and the problems of ordinary people in Malayan society. They also criticized the weaknesses of local people, for example their gambling and womanizing. These songs were often enlivened by humour in the tone of voice and in the lyrics. The lyrics, which were relevant and amusing, became the focal point for listeners. These songs cut across ethnic lines, combining Chinese, Indian and Western elements, and used upbeat dance rhythms such as rumba and tango. The lyrics, sung in different dialects, dealt with the experiences and problems of all the ethnic communities in Malaya in a comic way.

*Taxi Rumba* (Che Tarminah and Piet S, HMV, P. 13172, 1939) was a comic song, using the rumba rhythm, about the problems faced by taxi drivers. Sung as a duet between a female passenger and a male taxi driver, the song showed the audience how passengers often took the driver for granted and ordered him around, how the engine frequently broke down, how the taxi driver was often harrassed by policemen who took away his license because his lights were not working properly or his number plates had disappeared.
Comic songs often used bahasa pasar (market or colloquial Malay), which juxtaposed different languages spoken in the daily lives of ordinary urban folk. In *Taxi Rumba*, some English words (in *italics*) were added. Another example, *Apik Tukang Becha* (P. 13173, Nyi Tarminah or Piet S., HMV July 1939), described the hard life of a Chinese trishaw puller in bahasa pasar with Hokkien words such as *kampoh* (cover with cloth), *apik* (old uncle), *chap-ngoh* (fifteen) inserted:

*Hari hujan becha kampoh / Tapi apik basah / Orang kasi duit chap-ngoh / Apik banyak marah.*

When it rains I have to cover the trishaw with cloth / But old uncle gets wet / People pay me fifteen [cents] / Old uncle is very angry.

Multilingualism exemplified everyday reality and social relations in the plural colonial society. These songs portrayed the polyglot colonial society and the common mixing of languages by the working class multi-ethnic population. By using several languages—colloquial Malay (the common language...
in the urban and rural areas), Hokkien, Cantonese, Hindi and English—the comic songs became relevant to multi-ethnic audiences. The use of duets, small talk, dialogue and the colloquial multilingual medium reminded audiences of everyday conversations in the marketplace. Through humour in the lyrics, singers were able to expose the problems of the common man and the contradictions present in the urban colonial towns. Humour also helped to ease anxieties about modernity and change.

The Malay recording artistes articulated their ideas about how to progress and move forward by composing lyrics which emphasized universal values such as humanity and responsibility towards the disadvantaged, such as the working-class poor, orphans and women. They advocated change through education and moral guidance. By combining the key terms employed by nationalists and modernist Islamic reformists with hybrid musical elements and multilingual texts, the gramophone musicians promoted their own form of national culturalism, a form that was modern, cosmopolitan and inclusive of the diverse Malays and immigrants living in the archipelago.

**Recording Artistes Create Pan-Asian Music and a More Inclusive Malayness**

Just as the Malay language was the lingua franca of the wider Malay world, the hybrid *lagu Melayu* was the global popular music which mediated between social classes and the diverse Malay and other ethnic groups… Indeed, Malay music of the 78 rpm era formed the pan-regional music of the Malay archipelago. Song titles show that the content of 1930s recordings was not confined to the Malay peninsula, but included locations throughout the region. Some examples include *Embon Acheh* (Dew of Acheh) (Che Norlia, P. 12910), *Singapore Rumba* (Che Ainon and Kassim’s Orchestra, P. 12905), *Gendang Bandong* (Drums of Bandong) (Miss Julia and Lincoln’s Orchestra, P. 12906) and *Selasih Bali* (Passion Fruit of Bali) (Che Norlia, P. 12916).

The gramophone records of *lagu Melayu* were also marketed across the region. *The Malaya Tribune* (11 July 1934) reported that Chap Kuching recordings were sold in ‘the most remote parts of the Malay Peninsula, Sumatra and Java’. The *Straits Echo* (24 May 1934) further emphasized that ‘thousands of gramophone owners throughout Malaya and the Dutch East...
Indies’ were ‘enabled to enjoy the unique records of the Chap Kuching stars’. Malayan HMV catalogues of the 1930s contained information on both Malayan and Indonesian singers and their songs.

There was a constant flow of music, musical styles and performers in the region. Folk songs such as *Rasa Sayang* (Feeling of Love), *Terang Bulan* (Clear Moon) and *Lenggang Kangkung* (Swaying Kangkung [a type of vegetable]) were sung and enjoyed by diverse peoples. The song *Rasa Sayang* (N 53573), recorded by Lata Mangeshkar, the famous Indian film playback singer, in Malay and Hindustani, is a good example of how Malay folk songs crossed colonial, national and ethnic boundaries, and were not the property of any particular group or region.

Not only did the musicians actively advocate a broader type of Malay-ness through hybridity and flexibility in their music, they also experienced this openness in their lives. For them, there were no borders in the greater Malay world. The majority of the pre-World War II recording artistes were *bangsawan* performers, who came from a variety of backgrounds. They came from, performed in and travelled all over Malaya, Southern Thailand, Sumatra, Java and Borneo. They interacted with and married into the many and varied ethnic groups of the archipelago; they spoke and performed in various languages and dialects; they were part of and identified with a diverse and mobile group of people living in the greater Malay world. Many were of mixed parentage. They spent long periods of time outside Malaya, and exchanged knowledge and learnt from one another and from performers from China, India, the Middle East, Europe and the Philippines (Tan 1993; Cohen 2002). The following brief biographies illustrate this cosmopolitan community.

Mr Ahmad CB, an HMV and Chap Singa singer, was born in Medan, Sumatra, in 1915. He followed his father, a merchant, to Trengganu and later to Singapore. After performing with a *bangsawan* group in Singapore, he set up his own *sandiwara* group, Asmarat Dana, in Medan, and toured Malaya, Sumatra and Riau. Later he formed *Hiburan Malam Gembira* (Happy Night Entertainment), an entertainment group which staged singing, dancing, drama and comedy acts at amusement parks in all the states of Malaya (personal communication, 1986). From the time he was five years old, Ahmad CB moved back and forth between British Malaya and the Dutch East Indies. He was most famous for his songs *Kachang Goreng* (Fried Peanuts), *Bunga Harum* (Scented Flowers) and *Malaya*. 

Downloaded from Brill.com07/11/2019 11:12:15PM via free access
Mr Aman Belon, known for his HMV recordings of lagu klakar (comic songs), was born in Singapore in 1896. He was a Malay comedian in the opera, and could speak Hokkien, Teochew, Tamil, Arabic and Malay, which he incorporated into his comic songs. He travelled with Wayang Kassim, the Star Opera, the Rose Opera and the Nooran Opera to various parts of Malaya and Bangkok. Some of his most famous comic songs included Broken American Song and Dunia Terbalek (The World Upside Down) (Edrus 1960:155-60).

Miss Aminah Nani (also known as Minah Alias), HMV recording artiste and bangsawan prima donna, was born in Singapore in 1919. She performed in her father's troupe, the Genani Opera, when she was a child, and later joined Dean's Tijah opera which took her to Sarawak, Pulau Bangka, Bali and Java. She studied Javanese and Balinese dance with Miss Riboet when she was in Java (personal communication, 1986). She was known for her lagu Melayu (asli), including Seri Mersing and Kuala Kedah.

Miss Ainon Chik, an HMV singer and bangsawan heroine, was born in Singapore in 1911. Her mother was a Sarawakian Chinese and her father a Bugis. Ainon performed with the Genani Star Opera when she was a child. She learnt Hindustani and European songs from Nani (the father of Miss Aminah) who owned the Genani Star Opera. She later joined the City Opera on its tour of Palembang, Sumatra and Java (personal communication, 1986). She was well known for songs such as Cempaka Putih (White Cempaka), Cik Mamat Parang Tajam (Sharp Knife Cik Mamat) and Aladom.

Mr Zubir Said, a well-known HMV composer and musician, came from a Minangkabau family in West Sumatra. Born in 1907 at Bukit Tinggi, Zubir played the violin in a kronchong group in West Sumatra when he was a young man. He went to Singapore to pursue music, joined the City Opera as a violinist and became the leader of its ensemble in 1936. HMV then offered him a job as a recording supervisor, organizing and conducting recordings. He also acted as a talent scout for HMV and looked for new singers and musicians at music competitions. As a talent scout, he travelled to Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Jakarta, Surabaya and Medan. He married Tarminah Kario Wikromo, a kronchong singer from Jakarta whom he had groomed for recording (Mardiana Abu Bakar 1990).

Mr Khairudin bin Umair-ruddin (commonly known as Dean or Tairu), a bangsawan hero and owner of the famous Dean's Tijah Opera, was born in Hong Kong in 1890. His mother was Chinese and his father was a sailor of
Indian descent who sailed between Singapore and Hong Kong. Dean went to an English school in Hong Kong and could speak English, Cantonese and Hindustani. After following his father to Singapore, he joined Wayang Yap Chau Tong, Wayang Kassim, the Star Opera and the Jaya Opera. He and his wife Che Wan Tijah (another famous Chap Kuching singer from Pontianak) performed widely in Malaya, Sumatra, Java and Bangkok (Edrus 1960:160-4; Berita Filem, 2, 1960; Straits Echo, 24 May 1934). He was best known for his songs Selamat Tinggal (Goodbye), Wang (Money) and Ali Baba.

These recording artistes could not survive on recording alone and continued to rely on live performances to support themselves. Recording was only carried out three or four times a year, and artistes were paid according to their abilities (class A RM 20, B RM 15, C RM 12). Those who were not from Singapore, such as Minah Yem, had to take time off from their bangsawan troupe to make recordings, and were given an allowance to go to Singapore for recording whenever they were called on. For most of the year, however, they travelled the region performing in the bangsawan troupes (personal communication, Ahmad CB, Ainon Chik and Menah Yem, 1986).

The diverse group of Malay recording artistes mixed, lived and worked with other non-Malay musicians as they performed in the travelling bangsawan troupes. Miss Menah Yem, for example, who recorded songs such as Kuching Kurus (Thin Cat) for HMV, studied dance and performed with the Filipinos Henry and Edy in the City Opera (personal communication, Menah Yem, 1986). The veteran musician Alfonso Soliano pointed out that many of the musicians in the studio orchestras were in fact Filipinos who had originally been brought in by the British to form the Selangor State Band. When the band disbanded in 1927, most of the musicians (including Alfonso's own father) stayed on in Malaya. These musicians played for nightclubs, hotels, cabarets and funerals, and in the bangsawan (personal communication, Alfonso Soliano, 1986). One well-known Filipino musician was D. Lincoln, who headed the orchestra and was a talent scout for Columbia. He travelled around the towns and organized competitions to look for singers for Columbia. D. Lincoln's orchestra also accompanied HMV singers in the 1930s, including Miss Nancy (HMV catalogue, April 1933).

From these brief histories we can see that these recording artistes lived, experienced and performed cosmopolitan modern identities; their identities were not fixed. They created social and cultural networks as they crossed the borders of Malaya, Borneo, Java, Sumatra, Borneo and Southern
Thailand; they mixed with migrants and worked with performers from the Middle East, Europe, India, the Philippines, and China; they married people of other ethnicities and created music that was syncretic. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, the women who became bangsawan performers and gramophone singers confronted gender roles in Malay society by becoming performers who sang in public and by having careers in singing and acting (Tan 1995).

Through their songs, the singers helped raise the awareness of their multi-ethnic audience concerning progress, change and a Malayness that was not fixed to any one place or ethnic group. Some musicians even encouraged the building of a Malaya which included other ethnic groups. Ahmad CB wrote the lyrics and melody of the song Malaya (QF 87, Chap Singa 1935), which praised the beauty of the country and the different races living in it. The song contained an ensemble of many sounds and voices including members from the Malay, Chinese, Indian, Eurasian, Filipino, Portuguese and English ethnic groups35 (Filem Melayu, 1 May 1941).

Malaya, tanah pesaka / Malaya, Malaya, maju dan jaya / Malaya, Malaya, indah dan permai / Berbagai bangsa hidup aman damai

Malaya, inherited land / Malaya, Malaya, developed and successful / Malaya, Malaya, precious and beautiful / Different races living peacefully

Conclusion

The interaction of local, regional and global forces, and the agency of the recording artistes, shaped and gave meaning to popular gramophone music in pre-World War II British Malaya. The 78 rpm music industry, dominated by HMV, saw the emergence of an eclectic, innovative, yet indigenous, popular music in the 1930s and early 1940s. Contrary to Adorno’s predictions of homogeneity and standardization (Adorno 1994), the record industry did not result in the creation of homogeneous music passively consumed by audiences. Even though GC monopolized production in Malaya, disseminated Anglo-American popular music to large audiences and created a new

35 ‘mengandongi pasokkan bunyi-bunyian dan nyanyi suara ramai ia-itu termasok-lah ahli-ahli daripada bangsa Melayu, China, India, Eurasia, Manila, Portuguese dan Inggeris’.
consumer culture in the port cities of Malaya, a great variety of local music was also created. In fact, the recorded music was dynamic and constantly changing. It was not composed in the studios but was created by performers who were active in bangsawan theatre and dance halls. It was also actively embraced by amateur musical groups, entertainment bands and musicians of diverse backgrounds in the amusement parks. Gramophone music was a new popular music that developed primarily in live performance and was transmitted orally to mixed audiences in the urban areas of British Malaya.

Western technology and the colonial market system provided the Malay musicians of the 1930s and 1940s with the means to share their own ideas of colonial modernity, a modernity which was hybrid, cosmopolitan, inclusive, and concerned with creating a more advanced society. The musicians were able to negotiate the influx of Anglo-American popular music by indigenizing it. Musicians combined local Malay musical elements with Anglo-American, Chinese, Indian, Arabic, and other foreign elements in innovative ways. Folk social dance genres such as the asli, inang, joget, and zapin were adapted to the modern sound; musical elements from the different ethnic groups were juxtaposed and adapted to the instruments of the Anglo-American dance band. However, Malay folk flavour was maintained through the use of Malay pantun topics and debate, independent melodic lines, the traditional singing style, and drumming patterns. The gramophone musicians and singers also appropriated Anglo-American dance rhythms such as the foxtrot, waltz, tango, and rumba. They would use Malay texts which engaged with the contemporary discourses on the way forward, moral guidance and an all-encompassing Malayness. Comic songs with topical lyrics and using different languages exposed the problems and complaints of ordinary people. Recorded music mediated tensions emerging in the new colonial urban societies, encouraged multi-ethnic audiences to think in new ways, and engaged them in social transition.

The lagu Melayu of the 1930s and 1940s became a locus where ethnic, class, gender and colonial boundaries were negotiated. Local musicians reworked musical genres and performance spaces into a counter-discourse to the dominant colonial culture disseminated by the British through education and the media. By recognizing and incorporating cultural difference, hybridity became an intervention and a means of challenging the dominant colonial culture. However the notion of difference was ambiguous and portrayed a multi-ethnic intertextuality that was localized. Malay music
recorded by HMV and its sister companies resisted definition as either simply Anglo-American or simply Malay. Unlike the exclusive music-making of the British colonizers, this new hybrid music was played through amplifiers at amusement parks and shops, and was accessible to people of all classes and backgrounds, Malay and non-Malay, throughout the Malay world. Female singers contested established gender roles in Malay society by becoming stars, performing in public and having careers both in bangsa-wan theatre and as gramophone singers. The notion of difference portrayed in the new recorded music was not just a series of bipolar opposites such as ‘colonizer/colonized, centre/periphery, western/indigenous, men/women’ (Hall 2005), but rather an all-embracing fusion.

The diverse group of musicians staged a form of rooted cosmopolitanism and a broader Malayness through their transborder practices and networks, their mobility across the archipelago, their openness to diverse cultures, and the ideas of change and progress they gained from the outside world even though they did not travel to Europe or America. They interacted with non-Malays and performed for audiences of various diasporas which were not limited to any one ethnic group or nation. They used Malay, their lingua franca, to speak the language of progress and advancement used by Malay nationalists and Muslim reformists, but appropriated western technology, and Anglo-American and other foreign musical idioms to reach out to a multi-ethnic audience comprising Malays, Eurasians, Chinese, Arabs, and Indians. They emphasized a vernacular modernity rather than the nation-state or race. By so doing, the musicians advanced their own Malay nationalist discourse and cultural nationalism, one that was open to other cultures and ethnic groups. They attempted to bring together the rhetoric of Malay progress (both of the nationalists with narrow definitions of the Malay bangsa and those appealing for a broader Malay world) in their songs which spoke to and attracted the modernizing, urban, multi-ethnic audiences of the colonial towns.

It is not surprising that the exclusive nationalist narrative was limited in its appeal during the period before the Second World War, as the diverse Malays lived in a wider Malay world with no fixed definitions of the Malay bangsa, identity or language. As Joel Kahn (2006:71) says, ‘There was a significant gap between the imagined Bangsa community’ of the ‘exemplary nationalists and the real communities within which many of their intended constituents lived’. The ‘real communities’ encompassed ‘a diverse, mobile
and commercialized population’ who lived, travelled and created networks throughout the region. They included Malay traders, educators and journalists, and the performers, musicians and singers that we have described. The artistes sang and recorded their fluid and cosmopolitan identities. The music they created represented the diversity, hybridity, complexity and modernity of the wider colonial society.

Lagu Melayu was commodified but remained local, meaningful and modern. It was pan-regional and not restricted to any one ethnic group, class or nation. As such, the music belonged to the diverse people of the greater Malay world who composed, performed, and consumed it. However, as Anderson (2012) suggests, the kind of rooted cosmopolitanism practised by the diverse group of Malay musicians could only survive in the late colonial period. With the formation of the nation state, fixed notions of national culture, language and identity were enforced, resulting in the suppression of the fluid Malay identities and Malay language of the earlier colonial era.36

The hybrid, cosmopolitan music of the Malay world in the early twentieth century illustrates the wealth of cultural traditions that we can draw from in the creation of national identities.

References


36 As an example, on 17 April 2004, the Deputy Information Minister, Datuk Zainuddin Maidin announced that the airing of Malay songs with a sprinkling of English words in the lyrics would be banned. The Ministry of Information was following the guidelines given by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP) against the inappropriate usage of Bahasa Malaysia which could ‘corrupt the national language’. Songs such as Anita Sarawak’s Seksis (Sexist), KRU’s Babe, Ruffedge’s Tiptap Tertipu (Easily Cheated) and Too Phat’s Alhamdulillah (Praise to God) were reported to have been ‘taken off the air’ by Radio and Television Malaysia.
Appadurai, Arjun

Appiah, Kwame Anthony
2006 Cosmopolitanism; Ethics in a world of strangers. New York: W.W. Norton and Co.

Bakhtin, Mikhail

Cohen, Matthew Isaac

Edrus, A.H.

Foulcher, Keith and Tony Day (eds)
2002 Clearing a space; Postcolonial readings of modern Indonesian literature. Leiden: KITLV Press.

Furnivall, J.S.

Gronow, Pekka

Hall, Stuart
2005 'Thinking the diaspora; Home-thoughts from abroad'; in: Gaurav Desai and Supriya Nair (eds), Postcolonialisms; An anthology of cultural theory and criticism, pp. 543-60. Oxford: Berg.

Harper, Tim and Sunil S. Amrith

Hooker, Virginia Matheson

Jones, Andrew F.
2001 Yellow music; Media culture and colonial modernity in the Chinese jazz age. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Kahn, Joel S.

Kinnear, Michael S.
2003 The 78 r.p.m. record labels of India. Heidelberg, Australia: Michael Kinnear.
Khoo, Kay Kim

Lomax, Alan
1968  *Folk song style and culture*. Washington, DC: American Association for the Advancement of Science.

Mardiana, Abu Bakar

Matusky, Patricia and Tan Sooi Beng
2004  *The music of Malaysia; The classical, folk and syncretic traditions*. Aldershot: Ashgate. [SOAS Musicology Series.]

Milner, Anthony
1995  *The invention of politics in colonial Malaya; Contesting nationalism and the expansion of the public sphere*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Muliyadi, Mahamood

Putten, Jan van der
2010  ‘Negotiating the great depression; The rise of popular culture and consumerism in early-1930s Malaya’, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 41-1:21-45.

Roff, William R.

Tan, Sooi Beng
1993  *Bangsawan; A social and stylistic history of popular Malay opera*. Singapore: Oxford University Press.


Wong, Yunn Chii and Tan Kar Lin
2004  ‘Emergence of a cosmopolitan space for culture and consumption; The new world amusement park—Singapore (1923-70) in the inter-war years’, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 5-2:279-304.

Yampolsky, Philip
Newspapers and magazines of the 1930 and 1940s

*Berita Filem*
*Filem Melayu*
*Saudara*
*Straits Echo*
*Sri Peranakan*
*Straits Times*
*Sunday Gazette*
*The Malaya Tribune*
*Utusan Zaman*

HMV catalogues of the 1930s and 1940s.

Performers Interviewed

Ahmad CB, Kuala Lumpur, 17 April 1986.
Ainon Chik, Kuala Lumpur, 15 April 1986.
Aminah Nani (Minah Alias), Penang, 27 July 1986.
Alfonso Soliano, Kuala Lumpur, 17 April 1986.
Menah Yem, Kuala Lumpur, 16 April 1986.

78 rpm records, His Master’s Voice, Chap Singa, Chap Kuching of the 1930s and 1940s.