During the early twentieth century Batavia transformed from a town of predominantly locally born people to a city of migrants in search of jobs in the expanding colonial administration, the service sector, railways and the harbour. During the preceding centuries Indonesians, Eurasians and *peranakan* Chinese had mixed socially and culturally, giving birth to an autonomous hybrid urban culture and ethnic group, the *orang Betawi*. They were Muslims, yet had developed their own creole customs and a Malay dialect interspersed with Chinese (Hokkien) words. Between 1900 and 1930 Batavia’s population had increased from around 80,000 to 326,000 and its ethnic composition had shifted significantly. A large portion of the newcomers came from the Sundanese hinterland surrounding the city. It is assumed that the influx of these newcomers in the twentieth century, including increasing numbers of Dutch, particularly women, heralded the ‘dissolution of an autonomous urban culture’, that was so typical for the nineteenth century (Abeyasekere 1987:83).

In this essay, I will argue that a new popular urban culture of an intrinsically hybrid nature emerged in Batavia during the first half of the twentieth century. It found expression in new forms of entertainment, particularly in theatre and music (Sutherland 1972-73:41-8). Moreover, as Vickers has pointed out, this popular culture had modern and cosmopolitan features, but it was not merely a derivative of Euroamerican modernity (Vickers 1996). The popular culture was the outcome of an autonomous and ambiguous process of a multi-ethnic urban society reinterpreting their cultural past. It was also the outcome of renewal and connecting to the outside world.

The thread of this story is the development of a home grown musical genre known in Indonesia and Malaysia as *keroncong*. According to ethnomusicologist Heins, and this is corroborated by the musicians themselves, the striking
characteristic of *keroncong* and the stringed ensembles that go with it, is the plucked cello imitating a drum (*kendangan*) (Heins 1975:24). The early origins of the genre remain obscure. The origins are believed to lie in Tugu, a village northeast of Jakarta near the port of Tanjung Priok. During the seventeenth century, a group of slaves of Indian ancestry from Portuguese colonies in Asia settled in Tugu. In 1661, the Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC, Dutch East Indies Company) granted them land titles (Niemeijer 2005:142-3). At some point in time, the Tugunese transformed Portuguese songs and an instrument resembling a ukulele of possible Portuguese origins into the five-stringed *keroncong* guitar.\(^2\) In the second half of the nineteenth century, *keroncong* is mentioned for the first time in local newspapers as a distinct musical genre adopted by Batavia’s Eurasians (Abeyasekere 1987:79; Cohen 2006:168).

While the villagers of Tugu had offered the source, the urbanites of the nearby town were responsible for developing and popularizing the *keroncong* style. A concise history of its evolution in the twentieth century allows us to take a journey through Batavia’s socio-cultural landscape and the transformations that occurred within urban society. It will take us along music competitions (concours) in one of the public parks, to music associations and the annual fair Pasar Gambir. It will also highlight the ambiguities of modernity and allows us to reveal the significance of the contribution of *peranakan* Chinese to the development of the genre, and the rise of a new breed of female vocalists.

**Concours and kumpulan**

By the turn of century *keroncong* was associated with illustrious males, often of Eurasian extraction, referred to as *buaya* (crocodile), a trademark of masculinity, who roamed the alleys of the cities’ poorer class neighbourhoods (*kampung*) as itinerant musicians. They acquired a reputation as social deviants and petty criminals. Yet by the late twenties, a change had occurred in the acceptance and popularity of *keroncong*. It was no longer exclusively associated with Eurasians living at the margins of society, and it had gained acceptance among different ethnic groups and different social classes.

A first indication of the changes is the work of Manusama (1919), who noted that a *keroncong* revival was occurring in Batavia, prompting him to write an article on the origins of the musical style. The growing popularity of the genre is also apparent from newspaper advertisements. In 1919 the Batavia published Chinese-Malay newspaper *Sin Po* advertised for a violin method, guaranteeing that if its study was seriously undertaken (*bladjar viool dengan soenggoe-soenggoe*) students would be able to play *keroncong* as well as *Stambul*.