CHAPTER THREE

‘DIRTY DANCING’ AND MALAY ANXIETIES:
THE CHANGING CONTEXT OF MALAY RONGGENG IN
THE FIRST HALF OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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Dedicated to the loving memory of Amin Sweeney, who devoted his life and soul
to the study of Malay verbal arts and music

Introduction

‘Dirty’ in this combination with dancing connotes an ‘erotic, titillating,
sexually stimulating’ quality of dance movements generally accompanied
by music. It does not soil the dance floor or leave a big mess afterwards,
but is envisioned to taint the minds and hearts of the participants and the
spectators. As Mary Douglas famously contended, ‘dirt’ or ‘uncleanliness’
refers to ‘something out of place’, something that is not in concordance
with a prevailing value system in a certain society or culture. Such a sys-
tem of course is constantly under pressure of change, innovation and in
need of modification to cope with new developments and experiences
(Douglas 1985:36–40). Generally speaking, cultural systems are conserva-
tive in nature and will be consolidated by social agents in order to give a
certain sense of stability to a community and confidence to its members.
Authorities will attempt to gradually implement change, so that the tex-
ture of the society will not be affected and the people do not panic too
much whenever they are confronted with the perennial cultural changes.
However, time and again these attempts fail and outbursts of social anxi-
ety may take place. Such upsurges of concern may be termed ‘moral panic’
referring to situations in which social practices or groups of people per-
ceived as the instigator of such practices, are considered as the cause of
(imminent) social upheaval or the ‘embodiment of evil’. Entrusted mem-
bers of the society take their responsibility to eradicate such ‘evil’ and will
then embark on a ‘moral crusade’ in the available mass media to save the
society from perils and further moral degradation. To be sure, negative
interpretations of changes in a society not always emerge spontaneously as a response to such changes but may well be socially and culturally defined. These ‘moral panic attacks’ are launched by intellectuals and powerful social agents for specific purposes, e.g. to galvanize public support to prevent the society from sliding into a (perceived) state of moral decay, or divert attention from other problems, and take place in particular social contexts. These social agents will have their own agenda for pursuing their crusade and single out a certain group of people as their ‘folk devils’ (see S. Cohen 2002; Macek 2006).

In the first half of the twentieth century Malaya witnessed several outbursts of cultural anxiety that ostensibly were triggered by a global trend of popular culture emanating from and fuelled by a western entertainment industry that distributed their products through a global network of urban centres. This ‘global’ popular culture seems to have experienced quite a sudden surge in the interbellum period, also reaching the shores of the Malay World and spreading rapidly through its urban centres. This ‘entertainment wave’ enhanced the cultural and ethnic hybridity and cosmopolitan outlook that already existed in these urban centres, where members of Eurasian and Interasian groups were instrumental in absorbing global trends and localizing these in their own social practices (cf. M. Cohen 2001; Lewis 2009; Van der Putten, forthcominga).

A booming entertainment industry sprang up all over Southeast Asia propelled by new developments in audiovisual technologies making newspapers and magazines, gramophones, records, radios and later also sound movies affordable for large groups. Chinese transnational capital was largely responsible for the development of amusement centres where a wide range of forms – from Teochew operas to wayang kulit, boxing matches to ballroom dancing, film screening, circus acts etc. – was made available to large parts of the population: entrance fee was only 5–10 cents, but extra fees applied if one wanted to watch a movie, boxing match, theatre play or dance (see Yung 2008; Wong Yunn Chii and Tan Kar Lin 2004). These parks are considered to have been melting pots of different ethnic groups and provided entertainment to all cultures with their respective popular forms (Rudolph 1996).

The first few decades of the twentieth century witnessed a huge popularity of social dance practices spurred by the European and American ballroom dance industries. Southeast Asian social dance practices partly originate in itinerant professional female dancers accompanied by a few musicians, who performed at people’s homes or at the side of the road.