

Globalization, Westernization and Islamic influence in Music in Malaysia

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In the interests of truth in advertising, let me make it clear that I am neither a Muslim nor a Malaysian. However, I have spent a lot of my adult life in Malaysia working at various times as a musician, a music educator and a researcher mainly on Malaysian music and mass media. I first went to Malaysia in 1973 as a US Peace Corps Volunteer to teach music in a secondary boarding school in the city of Seremban, about 50 miles south of the capital city of Kuala Lumpur.

I was in the Peace Corps for three and a half years, worked as a contract officer for the Malaysian government doing music education projects for 2 years during which time I was active as a performer, on French Horn, in Western oriented chamber music concerts and with the Radio Television Malaysia Orchestra. I'll spare you from further details except to say that I've now spent close to ten years living in Malaysia and Singapore, including a year conducting Fulbright sponsored research on Music and Mass media there.

Malaysia is a relatively small (329,750 sq km) Southeast Asian nation with a population estimated at 24,385,858 (July 2006 est.). It is a country that is ethnically diverse with the following breakdown of ethnicities of its population... Malay 50.4%, Chinese 23.7%, indigenous 11%, Indian 7.1%, others 7.8% (2004 est.).

According to online version of the CIA's World Factbook (<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/index.html>)

Malaysia, a middle-income country, transformed itself from 1971 through the late 1990s from a producer of raw materials into an emerging multi-sector economy. Growth was almost exclusively driven by exports - particularly of electronics. As a result, Malaysia was hard hit by the global economic downturn and the slump in the information technology (IT) sector in 2001 and 2002. The economy grew 4.9% in 2003, notwithstanding a difficult first half, when external pressures from Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and the Iraq War led to caution in the business community. Growth topped 7% in 2004 and 5% per year in 2005-06. As an oil and gas exporter, Malaysia has profited from higher world energy prices, although the rising cost of domestic gasoline and diesel fuel forced Kuala Lumpur to reduce government subsidies, contributing to higher inflation. Malaysia "unpegged" the ringgit from the US dollar in 2005 and the currency appreciated 6% against the dollar in 2006. Healthy foreign exchange reserves and a small external debt greatly reduce the risk that Malaysia will experience a financial crisis over the near term similar to the one in 1997. The economy remains dependent on continued growth in the US, China, and Japan - top export destinations and key sources of foreign investment.

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Then for fifteen years I did not go back to Malaysia. I was in graduate school in the United States, was raising a family there and was establishing myself as a Music Professor at California State University Sacramento, where I currently teach. During that time period we had a large number of students from Malaysia and I was sometimes visited by friends from there who kept me informed of musical and cultural developments there.

During that time I taught and wrote (Chopyak 1997) about change in Malaysian society, focusing on the rapid changes in that society. When I lived in Malaysia decades ago I sometimes was critical of foreign scholars who visited a country once 25 years earlier and thought that their information was still current. So in the year 2001 I had my first sabbatical and I traveled back to Malaysia on my own. I decided not to inform any friends there of my arrival so that I could see the changes for myself.

Despite all of this expecting to find that many things had changed, I found the extent of change in the capital region of Kuala Lumpur shocking. It wasn't that I saw so many new things so much as I could not find the old city that I thought I knew so well. Perhaps what illustrates this best is me going for dinner one night with a couple of Malaysian friends who I used to work with. As we drove up to the restaurant I admitted that I had no clue where we were, that I was completely lost due to all the new buildings and highways. My two Malaysian friends began laughing, and suggested that I walk up to the nearby intersection and look across the street. I did and saw the building that the three of us had worked in together many years earlier.

Malaysian Economics and Islamization

By all accounts Malaysia is economically at the top end of countries in the Islamic world (Huzaima). Whether this is despite the fact that it is a multiracial society or because it is multiracial, is beyond this paper's ability to look into. According to whichever criteria is used Malaysia is ranked as one of the most prosperous and economically advanced nations in the Islamic world. Some have even suggested that Malaysia should be used as an example to other parts of the Islamic world for what can be done economically.

I do not have a good understanding of how researchers come up with statistics, facts and figures regarding the globalization of different societies, but my personal experiences in Malaysia completely confirm those studies which show Malaysia as a highly globalized society. A year ago last April the New York Times had a chart and article on the extent to which different countries were globalized which listed Malaysia as one of the "More Globalized" countries ranking at 18th in the world just behind France (at 17) and ahead of Germany (20) Spain (25), Italy (26), Japan (27) and South Korea (29) (Fisher and Cox).

Since Malaysia became an independent country in 1957, it has clearly been trying to become more and more modern and more and more Islamic as well. This has been something that has been happening now for 50 years, resulting in Malaysia establishing an Islamic Bank, and Islamic universities and becoming in many ways a symbol for the rest of the Islamic world.

According to the BBC "How to create a 21st Century Muslim democracy in a multi-ethnic, multicultural society - that is the challenge faced by modern Malaysia. The country is known as one of South East Asia's most successful "tiger" economies" (Hardy).

In recent years both the previous Prime Minister, Dr. Mahathir Mohammed and the current Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi have tried very hard to promote the Malaysian version of Islam. Former Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohammed declared that "Malaysia is a Fundamentalist State and can be proud of the fact." He went on to explain that it is fundamental to Islam to be tolerant. The current Malaysian Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, has been promoting what he calls Islam Hadhari or what he has called "civilisational Islam," and that it was aimed at enhancing the quality of life through the mastery of knowledge and the development of individuals and the nation.

According to the New Straits Times of December 8, 2005

MALAYSIA yesterday proposed Islam Hadhari as a solution to the problems facing Muslims worldwide and as a guide to their successful future.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah said Islam Hadhari was a working model of renewal, reform and revivalism for the Muslim world.

"It is not a new religion or mazhab. It is not a new ideology. It is a guide for our (Muslim nations) development,"... Abdullah said Islam Hadhari was neither a concept to pacify the West, nor an approach to apologise for the perceived "Islamic threat". It was also not aimed at seeking approval from non-Muslims for a more friendly and gentle image of Islam.

"It is an approach that seeks to make Muslims understand that progress is enjoined by Islam. "It is an approach that is compatible with modernisation and yet firmly rooted in the noble values as injunctions of Islam."

(Zubaidah)

Malaysian Music (Chopyak 1986, 1987)

Everyone who hears Malaysian music for the first time expresses some surprise by how "western" or "modern" it sounds. That a society as modern as Malaysia produces music that is modern in its overall sound quality should not surprise us, but it seems to. Once again for the purposes of this paper I will not get into the larger issue of modern music being so closely related to concepts of Western music. What is clear is that musicians in Malaysia saw what they were doing was modernizing their music, not Westernizing it. Clearly this was first influenced by the Portuguese musicians from the time of the Portuguese occupation of Melaka, 400 years ago. However, it was the establishment of European style military band during the period of British colonization when Western music really began to have an enormous impact in Malaysia.

European military wind bands (or brass bands) have played an important role in Malaysian music affecting both traditional and contemporary musics throughout the 20th century. The Selangor State Band, begun by the British in 1894 to provide public popular entertainment for colonial officials and their families as well as "private entertainments," was the first military style wind band in Malaya. The musicians who played in this band, and their descendants, have played a prominent part in nearly all types of Malaysian music throughout the 20th century.

Since there were not enough Western trained musicians in Malaysia at the time the band was founded, it was necessary for the British to import the entire 64 member Manila Band from the Philippines to form this first "Malaysian" band. Within a few years similar state bands, also made up of Filipino musicians, were established in the

Malaysian states of Perak and Penang. Although the bands were made up of civilians, they were usually associated with the local police regiments. The official Malayan Police Band, begun in 1905, included musicians from Indian as well as from the Philippines.

Many of these musicians settled in Malaya, married and had children who often became musicians as well. The musicians and their descendants have had an enormous affect on music in Malaysia ever since. It was these wind band musicians who formed the Malaysian dance and cabaret bands in the early 20th century, and who played in the Bangsawan theaters and even for Malaysian productions of Chinese opera. So although it can be argued that the music introduced was European, it was performed by people who looked just like the people who already lived in Malaya.

Music in Contemporary Malaysian Society

In the last half of the 20th century Malaysian music has been closely intertwined with government policies concerning national culture and the mass media. This has affected the survival and promotion of various traditional musics as well as the development of contemporary music. The policy guidelines for a national culture essentially state that Malay culture and Islam are its basis, but that room must be allowed for some influences from the other racial and religious groups. The existence of a national culture is intended as both a reflection of national unity and an aid to its promotion.

The impact of the modern mass media on music in Malaysia can not be overstated. As in many other rapidly developing nations, people are most likely to experience music through commercial recordings, and radio and television broadcasts. The effects of the media coupled with the desire to create a national culture had the greatest impact with the creation of Radio Television Malaysia (RTM). The music activities of Radio Television Malaysia have covered a very broad range including: semi-classical music, popular songs, jazz, and traditional Malay, Chinese and Indian musics.

The creation of the RTM Orchestra in 1961 was one of the most significant developments in contemporary Malaysia music. The orchestra developed along the lines of a dance orchestra rather than a symphony orchestra, although at times it has been supplemented to perform symphonic style works. The orchestra has performed as an accompanying ensemble for singers and is also one of the primary sources of contemporary instrumental music in Malaysia. The orchestra and smaller ensembles consisting of orchestra personnel, have provided much of the music broadcast by RTM through the mid 1980s.

Throughout this period the RTM Orchestra was regarded as the premier musical organization in the country and it was clearly the trend setter which was emulated by the commercial music industry and others. Each of the branches of the Malaysian military has established its own dance style orchestras patterned after the RTM Orchestra, as have the city of Kuala Lumpur and some other major urban centers.

There is a close interaction among the different forms of mass media in Malaysia, especially concerning music. Through its first two decades RTM relied primarily on its own recordings and live performances of Malaysian music. Since the 1980s it has increasingly relied on the commercial recording industry for many of its broadcasts.

There is a tremendously wide variety of music available to people in Malaysia today. In addition to a large amount of music from other countries throughout the world, which is widely listened to, there is a great variety of styles within Malaysian popular music,

some of which have been greatly influenced by traditional folk music genres. In the 1950s song writers took the Western popular music idiom and gave them Malay lyrics and a Malay feeling. Although not specifically trying to write modern versions of traditional forms of Malay folk music, they were attempting to write modern popular songs which were Malay in feeling and appropriate to modern Malaysian life. This was accomplished by borrowing various rhythmic and stylistic aspects of well known traditional folk music. In this way traditional folk music genres such as *asli*, *joget*, *zapin*, *inang* and *masri* have had a direct influence on the development of Malaysian popular music.

Accordingly, the popular music styles have also had an impact on traditional folk music forms as Western instruments and Western musical concepts (most noticeably functional harmony) have begun to change contemporary performance practices. In Malaysia today traditional folk music can be heard performed by ensembles that use almost any combination of instruments. Even in performances by highly regarded traditional musicians it is not uncommon to have the violin, traditional drums and gong supplemented by electric guitars, piano and synthesizers. The colotomic function of the gong in some of the traditional ensembles is actually played by an electric bass guitar which also provides an implied functional harmony.

Malaysia has had a long history of contact with foreign music long before modern Malaysian popular music began. Throughout this history, instruments and other aspects of foreign music were often adopted and adapted to the local situation. This phenomenon has continued in the popular music realm as well. As a result, many of the international trends in popular music can be found in Malaysian popular music as well.

Malaysian popular music is clearly the single most important musical genre in Malaysia today. It is the type of music most often heard through the mass media and it appears to transcend ethnic and class groupings more than any other kind of music. The annual national talent time (*Bintang RTM*) features only popular songs, and there have been various national popular song competitions (such as *Pesta Lagu Malaysia*) since becoming an independent country in 1957. Television specials to celebrate religious and national holidays use popular songs much more than any other musical genre. There are even Malaysian songs for the Muslim holiday *Hari Raya* (Ramadan) that are usually performed in a conservative popular song style.

As Malaysia has become more prosperous and economically advanced the commercial music industry has also become more important in Malaysian society. Malaysian popular music today, although clearly based on the Western/International pop music styles, can be seen to represent a true expression of contemporary Malaysian culture. Not only is it listened to by more people than any other musical style, it is the only kind of music that is composed, arranged performed, marketed and listened to by all the ethnic groups in the country. The number of radio stations and television channels broadcasting a wide variety of musics has increased enormously in the past 15 years, at the same time that there has been a focus on the nation developing into a modern Islamic society.

In the past decade the Malaysian government (and Malaysian society in general) have continued to invest money in music education, music organizations and concert venues. The Malaysian National Arts Academy has developed a full music curriculum and is completing the construction of a new campus. At the same time several Malaysian universities have now established viable music programs which combine the study of Malaysian music within the context of a “Western” music curriculum. This

same period saw the establishment of several full time symphony orchestras such as the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra and the National Symphony Orchestra.

Nasyid (Islamic songs) in Malaysia

So what happens in a society that is a modern as Malaysia which is an Islamic country trying to set itself up as a leader of the Islamic world? Nasyid. "Nasyid has long been part of the Malaysian soundscape. Thought to have originated in the Middle East, the genre has always been associated with both poetry and the dissemination of Islamic values (Sarkissian 126)." The Malaysian Nasyid have received a lot of attention in recently years in other parts of the world including National Public Radio and in the United States and the British Broadcasting Corporation in England.

According to the BBC

Islamic boy bands in Malaysia are winning music awards for bringing people closer to Allah, while blazing the way for their female counterparts.

The Taleban in Afghanistan and the hardline clergymen in Iran might regard them as blasphemous, but in Malaysia they are even a hit with the Islamic fundamentalist PAS party.

When Raihan - which means "a sense of paradise" - released their first album two years ago, no-one thought lyrics like "God is great" would make music history.

The album went on to sell a record number of copies in both Malaysia and Singapore - a level of success that Raihan say is a miracle from God. (Harrison)

In recent years the group known as Raihan is credited with starting the boom in Nasyid groups in Malaysia. Raihan or 'Fragrance of Heaven' in Arabic was formally formed in October 1996. For much more information on modern Malaysian Nasyid I strongly recommend Margaret Sarkissian's excellent article in the 2005 Yearbook for Traditional Music entitled "Religion Never Had It So Good: Contemporary Nasyid and the Growth of Islamic Popular Music In Malaysia."

I want to play three short clips of videos of three Malaysian Nasyid groups which represent three different perspectives of contemporary Nasyid. The first is the title track, "Puji-Pujian" (Praises) from the recording by Raihan in 1997 that got the modern Malaysian Nasyid movement going. Notice that there are no musical instruments accompanying their singing other than traditional Malay hand drums. The second example is by the group NowSeeHeart their song "Damai Yang Hilang" (The Peace That is Lost). Obviously this is still musically in a conservative style but with a greater use of musical instruments. The third example that I want to play is a song entitled "Sebuah Pertemuan" (A Rendezvous) by the group UNIC. I will confess to spending some time with a Malay English dictionary trying to figure out what "UNIC" meant in Malay. It was pointed out to me that UNIC stood for the English words "You And I See." Perhaps if I had grown up in a world in which email already existed I would have figured that out on my own. Notice that in this example there is a much greater use of accompanying musical instruments. In fact this example sounds very much like it is in the style of boys bands in the West, yet this group is a Nasyid group that is very popular with younger teenagers in Malaysia because they are portray such clean cut values.

I am going to end this presentation with a quotation on globalization that I certainly do not agree with, but it is, I think, a reminder to all of us that globalization has been around for a long time.

We are living at a period of most wonderful transition which tends rapidly to accomplish that great end to which indeed all history points – the realization of the unity of mankind... The distances which separated the different nations and parts of the globe are rapidly vanishing before the achievements of modern invention, and we can traverse them with incredible ease...

Thought is communicated with the rapidity, and even by the power, of lightning... The products of all quarters of the globe are placed at our disposal, and we have only to choose which is the best and cheapest for our purposes, and the powers of production are entrusted to the stimulus of competition and capitalism (Sorkin, 2009).

This is a quotation by Prince Albert of England speaking at the opening of the 1851 London Exposition.

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