

SYNCRETIC CULTURAL MULTIVOCALITY AND THE MALAYSIAN POPULAR MUSICAL IMAGINATION

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This article discusses modes of expression in selected contemporary Malaysian popular songs and music videos in English. The article argues that such audio-visual engagements can be best described as productions of syncretic cultural multivocality. First, the fusion of the multiple musical styles that inundated Malaysia's novel popular music industry in the 1950s is traced. Next, the development of a creative pop multivocality in contemporary Malaysian "hip hops" is described. The article proceeds primarily by reading the Malaysian popular music scene as a cultural text and demonstrates that although the history of Malaysian popular music reflects pop cosmopolitanism, the cultural multivocality that characterises the Malaysian identity resonates as powerfully (if not more powerfully) at the core of the nation's popular imagination. The article concludes that the skilful integration of various influences from global popular culture creates a musical palimpsest that is and will continue to be imprinted with a multitude of signifiers of syncretic cultural multivocality.

Keywords: syncretism, popular music, Malaysian, transculturalism, nativisation

INTRODUCTION

This article seeks to discuss the creation of syncretic musical environments in the Malaysian popular music scene. The idea of a syncretic environment is expressed well in an episode of Burgess's *Time of the Tiger*, where we are presented with a scene from the birthday party of a Malayan ruler. Burgess describes a hybrid ensemble of "ronggeng music, Chinese opera, [and] Indian drums" (Burgess, 1996: 94) and a few pages later a band that includes a "rakish *songkok* over [a] saxophone [and] a young *haji* playing the drums" (Burgess, 1996: 99). Although the scene relies on a strongly Orientalist depiction, it also describes the cosmopolitan popular imagination in the making. In a single scene, we witness the fusion of multiple musical worlds and their attendant cultural resonances. Decades later, the contemporary Malaysian popular music scene reflects the cumulative effect of the multiculturalism described by Burgess. This article describes the modes of expression of such cultural syncretism in selected contemporary Malaysian popular songs and music videos in English. The article

argues that such multivocality can be best described as "pop cosmopolitanism," a term that Jenkins has used to refer to the ways in which "transcultural flows of popular culture inspire global consciousness and cultural competency" (Jenkins, 2004: 117). Furthermore, Stokes notes that cosmopolitanism is a significant tool within ethnomusicology that "restores human agencies and creativities to the scene of analysis, and allows us to think of music as a process in the making of 'worlds'" (Tsioulakis, 2011: 177). The ensuing discussion reveals the cultural syncretism that has characterised the Malaysian popular music industry since its beginnings in the 1950s and describes the syncretism's attendant creative pop multivocality.

THE SYNCRETIC POPULAR MALAYSIAN IMAGINATION: OPENING CHORDS

Chopyak (2007) notes that the influence of foreign culture on Malaysian music can be traced to the arrival of the Portuguese in the 16th century. However, Chopyak asserts that the actual impact on the local music scene formally began with the advent of British colonialism and the arrival of European military wind bands. These bands were originally intended as entertainment for the colonial officials. However, the band members, who were brought mainly from the Philippines and later India, settled in the country and married into the local population. Eventually, the musicians formed dance and cabaret bands and provided background music for the *bangsawan* theatres. Some performed in locally produced Chinese operas (Chopyak, 2007: 3–4).

Evidence of a globalised syncretic Malaysian popular music scene can be traced as far back as the 1930s. According to Matusky and Tan (2004), the music produced in the *bangsawan* theatre and the *joget* dance halls, then considered popular culture, amalgamated a multitude of rhythmic styles: Malaysian, Middle Eastern, Thai, Western and East Asian (Matusky and Tan, 2004 : 8). The main traditional forms were the *bangsawan*, the *keroncong*, the *ghazal* and the *asli* genres. Lockard notes that while there was evidence of a fusion of many intercultural musical influences in early popular music, these influences are recognised as a seminal part of the repertoire of the Malay popular cultural tradition (Lockard, 1996: 1–2). This assimilation could have occurred largely because the musical influences were rooted in what was understood as a traditionally Malay rhythmic pattern and incorporated traditional folk themes and tonalities (Lockard, 1996: 1–2). Thus, at that time, the "musical palimpsest" primarily exhibited a local Malay identity, with foreign influences integrated into this predominant, recognisably Malay identity. Perhaps Benjamin best expresses this aspect of Malay music of that era:

Melayu music, in its adoption of pseudo-Western harmony, behaves much like Melayu dance. Just as the dancers elaborate transition by constantly stepping forwards and back, so does Melayu music merely sidestep momentarily into other keys without actually modulating to them (Benjamin, 2004: 17).

In sum, the music of that era retained the larger Malay attributes while incorporating other elements. In later years, Western cultural influences began to enter the rhythmic patterns of the local musical ensembles instead of waiting on the sidelines. In the course of this integration, local Malay musical ensembles began to include predominantly Western instruments, such as the piano and drum sets, which subsequently began to replace traditional instruments, such as the Eastern accordion, the *keronchong*, the *ghazal* and other *asli* instruments (Lockard, 1996; Tan, 2005). The reasons for the change were connected largely to British colonialism and the polemics of the ideological hegemony of racial and cultural hierarchy that originated during this period. Thus, Western tones began to replace the *asli* overtones. The extent of such cultural domination of the local musical culture culminated in the strong tones of cosmopolitanism that affected the popular music imagination in the 1960s during what was known as the *Pop Yeh Yeh* era. The term *Pop Yeh Yeh* is said to be linked to the global spread of Beatlemania and has also been referred to as a generation that imitated Western models:

The *Pop Yeh Yeh* era between 1965 to 1971 was dominated by Western pop star imitators, although the uniquely Malaysian style of blending local musical cultures continued in some quarters with some singers using *asli* or traditional Malay vocal techniques and others including elements of Indian film music (Ang, 2002: 9).

This statement may emphasise the aspect of mimicry. However, one could regard the prowess of the *Pop Yeh Yeh* musicians in integrating various elements of global musical traditions as a reflection of the cultural competence that Jenkins mentions in reference to cosmopolitanism. If the earlier tendency was to avoid purely Western styles, now, most music borrowed heavily from Western rhythmic patterns while retaining the *asli* vocal techniques and adapting them to the influences of Western and Eastern music. Ultimately, *Pop Yeh Yeh* was an era that increased the tempo of transcultural musical fusion. The era represents the beginning of a transcultural flow of Western musical influence set to the beat of a nascent Malaysian nation. In addition to the Beatles, flower power and other emblems of the hippie generation made their way to Malaysian music shores. One must only examine some of the album covers produced in the 1960s

to witness the extent of the transcultural flow of popular culture, which subsequently was intermingled with the local music scene.



Photo 1: The album cover of Wirدانingsih and the Dorado Sound Unlimited
Source: Wirدانingsih and the Dorado Sound Unlimited, n.d.



Photo 2: The album cover of Janis Joplin with Big Brother and the Holding Co.
Source: Janis Joplin with Big Brother and the Holding Co., n.d.

The similarities of the two covers depicted above, i.e., the psychedelic style of the font, the design and the overall colour scheme, reflect the "canvas of emerging possibilities generated by local negotiations of transnational currents," that Tsioulakis has used to refer to the popular imagination (Tsioulakis, 2011: 176). A distinct sense of place and a geographical space characterised the music of the 1960s. This element has been inherited by modern popular artists, as discussed below. In this connection, the following album cover from the group A. Rahman Mohd. and the Fabulous Orchids is interesting.



Photo 3: The album cover of A. Rahman Mohd. and the Fabulous Orchids
Source: A. Rahman Mohd. and the Fabulous Orchids, n.d.

A semiotic reading of the appearance of the performers on the album cover reveals unmistakable signs of the influence of the attire worn by Western popular musicians and characteristic psychedelic overtones. Another interesting sign on the album cover is the identification of the performers hometown, Pontian, in the Malaysian state of Johore. The album cover depicts a syncretism of place and space within the popular imagination, i.e., a translocal identity. As Rumford notes:

At the core of cosmopolitanism is a concern with new social relations: to self, to others, and to the world. Cosmopolitanism is very much about the place of the individual in the world, and the way in which political communities of whatever scale orient themselves inwardly towards individuals, and outwardly towards the rest of the world (Rumford, 2005: 2).

The album cover epitomises the intertwining of all three of the aspects that Rumford mentions. However, cosmopolitanism does not necessarily entail a central concern with Western culture. We must only recall the syncretism of multiple musical aesthetics in the passage from Burgess's novel to note that Malaysian syncretism can also include Asian aspects. This realisation raises the issue of cosmopolitanism's politics and ideological assumptions. As Appadurai notes, cosmopolitanism should be studied "without logically or chronologically presupposing either the authority of the Western experience or the models derived from that experience" (Robbins and Pheng, 1988: 1). Appadurai's cosmopolitanism is perhaps most significantly expressed in the Malaysian popular imagination by the legendary late P. Ramlee, who was more inclined toward Asian musical influences than Western. As Ang notes:

P. Ramlee's vision was to create a uniquely Malaysian style, based on Malay folk music but infused with elements from the various local musical cultures. His over 250 songs reflect the influence of Malay syncretic music forms, especially the *inang*, *zapin*, *masri*, *asli*, *boria* and *joget* forms, as well as Western dance rhythms (rhumba, slowfox, waltz, cha cha, mambo and twist), and *Hindustani* and Arabic melodies and rhythms (Ang, 2002: 9).

Ramlee believed that the popular music of his time was being overwhelmed by Western influence. The inclusion of Indian, *Hindustani* and Middle Eastern rhythms is best described as "postcolonial cosmopolitanism" (Parry, 1992). Two other notable singers of Ramlee's time were Sharifah Noor and Ahmad Nawab. Sharifah Noor was often accompanied by the band Orkes Zindegi, which used predominantly Indian musical instruments. She was

commonly referred to as the "Lata Mangeshkar" of Malaya, the famed Indian songstress. The cover of the album by Sharifah Noor and Orkes Zindegi in Photo 4 semiotically expresses the incorporation of Asian cosmopolitan tones in the popular musical imaginary.

Note the presentation of the lettering on the cover, which imitates the Sanskrit script. By combining the lettering with the snapshot of the main artist, Sharifah Noor, who is wearing 1950s cosmopolitan attire (a flower print top and the sunglasses), the album cover dismantles the authority of Western cosmopolitanism magnetism. A resistance to Western cosmopolitanism can also be observed in Rocky Teoh, a popular music artist from Taiping, Perak. Although Teoh was an Elvis Presley enthusiast (Photo 5), he creatively adapted the rhythms of his idol and his own ethnic community. For instance, Teoh's Wolf Call incorporates both Mandarin Chinese and English while unmistakably reflecting the rock-and-roll aspect of Presley's music (garagehangover.com). Teoh's performance of Wolf Call and the following image of the artist express an obvious cosmopolitan syncretism.

The 1970s marked the onset of a sense of nationhood within popular music, and while cosmopolitanism was not abandoned, it retreated to some extent into the background as more pressing issues came to the fore in the wake of the 1969 racial riots. Matusky and Tan (2004) draw attention to the lasting effects of the riots not only on the larger economic and social policies, such as Bumiputera Affirmative Action, but also on the nation's cultural policies. The prominence given to Malay as a national language and instrument of unity amongst Malaysians resulted in the development of a Malay music industry that crossed ethnic boundaries. Many choose to view the National Cultural Policy that was established during this period as generally restrictive and ideologically restrictive. However, the period witnessed the rise of a new wave of Asli music, which brought not only Malay music and musicians into the public eye but also introduced performers of other ethnic backgrounds into the flourishing music scene. The music of this period belied the hostility and cultural duress that are often cited as a predominant characteristic of the Malaysian cultural milieu of the early 1970s. Popular bands such as Roziah Latiff and the Jayhawkers, the Alleycats, Discovery, Carefree and Cenderawasih were visually multi-ethnic but sounded Malay. Songs such as "*Sekuntum Mawar Merah*" by the Alleycats and "*Rindu Bayangan*" by Carefree remain today lyrical masterpieces that cross ethnic divisions. Similarly, solo artists, such as DJ Dave, Sudirman and Sharifah Aini, who were known for their particular blend of Western folk and popular music with local *asli* rhythms and the Malay inflections, had a large following that transgressed ethnic boundaries. Therefore, nationalist policies might have been formally implemented and enforced and perhaps disliked in certain quarters; however, at the same time, the music industry displayed a lyrical flair for the national language and perhaps created one of the rare moments when the nation defined by authority and the nation defined by public opinion (Shamsul

Amri, 1996) coexisted. This musical mixing was continued until the 1990s by an increasing number of musicians and vocalists who amalgamated the various themes, styles and rhythms of the nation in popular productions.



Photo 4: The album cover of Sharifah Noor and Orkes Zindegi
Source: Sharifah Noor and Orkes Zindegi, n.d.

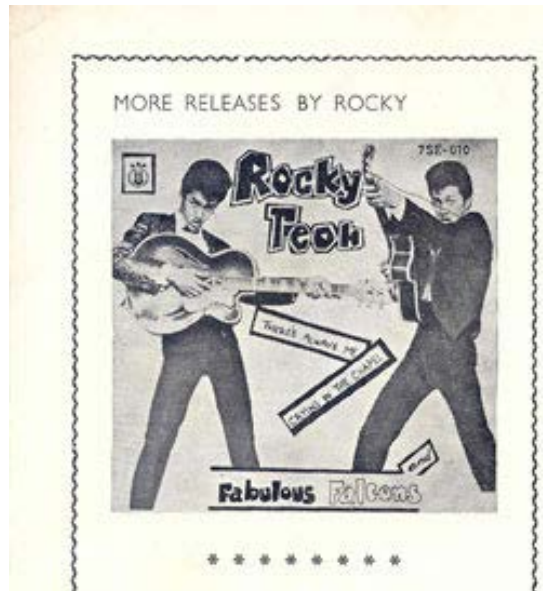


Photo 5: The album cover of Rocky Teoh
Source: Rocky, T., n.d.

Many associate this style with the more liberal cultural policies of the 1990s (Ting, 2009). Perhaps such policies facilitated the Malaysian appearance of international hip-hop culture. The difference between the Metropolitan influence in the 1990s and the music of previous eras could be the more inclusive integration of the multi-ethnic sounds of the nation. In the 1970s and 1980s, *asli* rhythms or the Malay language predominated, even when the bands were multi-ethnic. In contrast, the music of the 1990s reverberated both visibly and audibly with the sights and sounds of various ethnic communities and the global rhythmic patterns of international hip-hop culture. The following section elaborates on the progress of Malaysian music to a more globalised, syncretic cultural multivocality, i.e., a pop cosmopolitanism that draws from the local and the global communities simultaneously and symbiotically.

SYNCRETIC MULTIVOCALITY AND THE "HIP HOPS" OF CONTEMPORARY MALAYSIAN POPULAR MUSIC

If in the early years Malaysian popular music was played or recorded live, the new millennium witnessed the advent of the global influence of the music video, i.e., short films that project the artistic visualisation of a song. The advent of music video redrew the boundaries of cosmopolitanism's influence, particularly after the spread of the Internet and the YouTube video-sharing website. An additional factor was hip-hop music. Originally a musical genre from the United States of America, more specifically Black American culture, hip-hop music has become a global phenomenon that has resulted in the appearance of what Alim terms "Hip Hops", i.e., heterogeneous negotiations of the global phenomenon set to the rhythms of local language, culture and ideological practices (Alim, 2011: 123). Expanding further on the intricacies of the idea of hip hops, Alim uses account of a hip-hop concert in Shanghai:

two rappers "face off, microphones in hand," trading improvisational rhymes in a competitive verbal duel. On first glance [...] the verbal artists appear like "typical" Hip Hop emcees, dressed in "baggy pants" and "baseball caps," but a closer listen reveals that they are performing in multiple language varieties. "One rapper spits out words in a distinctive Beijing accent, scolding the other for not speaking proper Mandarin," whereas "his opponent from Hong Kong snaps back to the beat in a trilingual torrent of Cantonese, English, and Mandarin, dissing the Beijing rapper for not representing his people" (Alim, 2011: 58). The crowd—not in Los Angeles, not in New York, but in Shanghai—"goes wild!" (Chang cited in Alim, 2011: 123).

The listener's progression from a preliminary assumption regarding the performance to the awareness of the distinctive meanings that emerge as the performance unfolds reflects the extent of pop cosmopolitanism and its dynamically fluid negotiations and manipulations of global cultural borders. More significant in the scene described above is the grounding of local identity politics, that is, of the question of who one is even as one adopts a global identity. These issues are relevant to the contemporary Malaysian popular music scene. The following discussion chooses to focus on a selection of popular music and the evidence of pop cosmopolitanism revealed in audio-visual compositions. The discussion begins with the work of Point Blanc (Nicholas Ong) and Yogi-B (Yogeswaran Veerasingam), both formerly of the hip hop/rap group Poetic Ammo, and ends with a relatively new song in the American folk song genre by Ezra Zaid and Azmyl Yunor using mainly acoustic guitar.

The song "Ipoh Mali" (2007) remains Point Blanc's most popular composition. Whereas the title is a strongly nativised signifier of the origins of the performer in the town of Ipoh in the northern state of Perak, Malaysia, the lyrics reflect a vision that is infused by cosmopolitan multilocality and intertextuality. The line "Ipoh where you at?" in the first stanza alludes to the song "In the Ghetto" by Rakim, an influential Black American rap artist. The song subsequently ends with the full phrase from Rakim's song, "it ain't where you're from/it's where you at." Whereas on one level, this reference may indicate an overt Western influence, the presence of a multitude of other inflections within the song reveals a strongly localised ethno-musical cosmopolitanism.

In the repeated phrases, such as "yo" "holla" and "y'all" we may observe varied inflections of "Black American hip hop nation language varieties" (Alim, 2011). However, the cityscapes that are imprinted on the hip hop artist's poetic space reveal a highly localised consciousness. We perceive this consciousness in the lines "yo I was born and raised in a place/where the hottest women come from/Ipoh city/that's where I'll always belong/don't get me wrong yo/I'm KL lite now/" and again in "to all mah' peeps all down at JB/throw your hands up if y'all hear me/to all mah cats down at KL city/holla at me if y'all hear me/to all my *pheng ew* across the sea now/Penang khia are y'all still down?/and everybody across the nation/you can make it just be patient/" (Point Blanc, 2007a). Thus, the lyrical space becomes an amalgam of the quintessential Malaysian metropolitan cityscapes while the words *pheng ew* (friend) and Penang Khia (Penangites) smoothly incorporate the ethnic Chinese.

Ultimately, as Alim and Pennycook have argued, "the relations between transcultural flows of popular culture, the localisation of hip-hop and English, and the mixing of other languages, suggest that hip-hop is a site where languages and identities are refashioned, where new dynamics of language use and identity are produced in the performance" (Alim and Pennycook, 2007: 94). The notion of performance can be further extended to the genre of the music video. When the song is set to a visual spectacle, as in a music video, the aspects of syncretic

cultural multivocality become more apparent. In the "Ipoh Mali" music video, after an introductory scene played in Malaysian-Chinese domestic setting, the video narrates the transformation of the performer from the young boy sitting quietly hunched over at the table into a cosmopolitan hip hop artist in the familiar baseball cap, baggy pants and oversized t-shirt. The next scene introduces a row of stylish trainers, another distinguishing characteristic of a hip-hop artist. However, as the scene concludes, the artist puts on a pair of white sneakers of the immediately recognisable inexpensive brand Bata, as shown sequentially in Photo 6.



Photo 6: The music video of "Ipoh Mali"
Source: Point Blanc, 2007b

The reason for wearing the Bata shoes emerges halfway into the song, when the singer says "as my story drops/I recollect I never had them fancy kicks, fancy clothes all I had was Hip Hop/and peer pressure left me with a scar/cos' when kids were rockin' Airwalks/I was rockin' Bata" (Point Blanc, 2007a). As the visual narrative develops, we observe the imprints of the local landscape mentioned above combined with a range of cosmopolitan young men and women and the affirmation of the global phenomenon of the successful young rap artist who has "seen it all/the ladies, the groupies, the fancy parties, award ceremonies, glory and all that money" (Point Blanc, 2007). However, as has been the case from the beginning with other Malaysian popular music performers, the sense of place and space is ineradicable from Point Blanc's ethno-musical consciousness. The video calls attention audibly and visually to familiar Ipoh landmarks, such as Ipoh Garden Eastside, Wooley Food Centre and the Hotel Excelsior. However, the video ends with an interlude in Hokkien Canto rap, similar to the scene of the

Mandarin rappers cited above. Thus, the video reveals the various ways in which the cosmopolitan tones of the Black rap identity are appropriated and projected in a dynamic between Asia and the West.

Similar linguistic and semiotic signifiers are evident in the work of the Malaysian Indian rap artist Yogi-B. "Madai Thiranthu" is a remix of a song by the South Indian composer Ilayairaja. The song begins with an introductory Carnatic interlude, which is subsequently overlaid with hip-hop poetics: "waa, now y'all/oh no/oh no it's Yogi-B and Natchatra/that's why Emcee Jesz, Dr. Burn, Mr G, so Yogi-B/vallavan makkalukku nee eduthu sollu" (Yogi-B and Natchatra, 2006a). Naming the artists who appear in a song is considered to be a significant aspect of Black American hip-hop culture and part of a strategy of self-assertion and self-affirmation (Kellner, 1995: 178). Thus, this allusion reveals a cosmopolitan intertextuality, as was observed above with respect to Point Blanc. The chorus develops the song's global syncretism the lyrics fluidly move between hip-hop and Tamil poetics:

dam it's gonna blow
thaavum nadhiyalai naan (in a cascading river)
baby u should know
koovum siru kuyil naan (I'm a singing bird)
isai kalaingan en aasaigal aayiram (I'm a lover of music with many
dreams)
ninaithathu palithhadhu (that have come true)

Yogi-B appeared at a conference on South-Asian hip-hop culture (Hiphopistan) organised at the University of Chicago, where he performed this song, which attested his cosmopolitan reach. This influence is alluded to in the song as Yogi-B asserts his status as a significant Tamil rap artist who travels the globe:

Kola lumpur ho...chennai london
tamilan mc mudhalvan vallavan rap isai kalai vidhiin (pioneer
Tamil MC and a king of rap within music)

The juxtaposition of Kuala Lumpur with London and Chennai marks the home city as part of the collective metropolis and thus elevates the status of the rap artist when the Malaysian city is included in that lyrical landscape. As with Point Blanc, the song ends with an affirmation of the hip-hop identity of the performers. However, this affirmation is strongly tempered by the accentuation of the ethno-musical awareness of the performers through the integration of Tamil:

We the hip-hop homie
Kavithai gundar for life... (king of poetry for life)
isai, alli alli parugevendiya (there is sweetness in giving)
amulztham ada athu (and giving toward music)

The song's music video increases the impact of this facet. In the video, the Carnatic interlude mentioned above emerges in a scene that shows an Indian male dressed in the traditional attire of a Carnatic musician and carrying a traditional portable hand-pumped wooden harmonium, which he plays with much spirit (see Photo 7). Considered to have been introduced into India by French missionaries during the Raj, the harmonium symbolises cultural adaptation. Subsequently, the instrument was used in local music. When considered against the backdrop of the song's hip-hop poetics, the harmonium draws attention to a little-noticed historical manifestation of cosmopolitanism and liberates the song from the limitations of contemporary Metropolitan consciousness.



Photo 7: The music video of "Madai Thiranthu" (youtube.com)
Source: Yogi-B and Natchatra, 2006b

The video also reveals a similar fusion of hip-hop identity with the local landscape. We observe the familiar hip-hop MC rappers striding through Kuala Lumpur as the camera pans and focuses on a number of important signifiers in the local background. These scenes are interspersed with visual affirmations of the status of the performers as recording artists using recording studio scenes and images of the production of the group's album as a compact disc (see the collage from the video in Photo 8).



Photo 8: The collage from the music video of "Madai Thiranthu" (youtube.com)
Source: Yogi-B and Natchatra, 2006b

The song concludes with an integration of Tamil *sangeetham* notes and the well-known Tamil poetic discourse *puthukkavithai* of the famous Tamil poet and freedom fighter Bharathy, or Mahakavi Subramanya Bharathiyar. The discourse is particularly significant in its references to struggle and sacrifice, as expressed in the lines "Iraivan mattum arivaan...Naan sinthiya vervai...ratham...thiagam..." (Only God understands the sacrifices of my sweat and blood/poetic fighter for life...). The evocation of Bharathiyar's struggle can be considered to refer to the struggle of the artists to establish themselves on the local and global musical stage. Thus, the song's images and lyrics represent the dismantling of orthodox cosmopolitanism's Western framework while including and emphasising Asian multiculturalism.

In contrast to the hip hop of the preceding artists, "That Okay Song" by Ezra Zaid and Azmyl Yunor might be best described as a contemporary folk song. The song is primarily distributed over the Internet and originated in the Internet television series *popteevee.com*. The song is an example of an emerging facet of the popular imagination and, again, speaks of the transgression of multiple borders and spaces. The song includes a strong political message and celebrates national cohesiveness through a seamless integration of nativised ethnic multivocality. The song also integrates localised cityscapes, similar to the audio-visual productions of Point Blanc and Yogi-B.

As the music video begins, we encounter the cosmopolitan figure of Ezra Zaid, who is wearing a Nike-embossed t-shirt and strumming a guitar as he wanders through a well-known Kuala Lumpur neighbourhood, Jalan Bukit Bintang (Bukit Bintang Street).



Photo 9: The music video of "That Okay Song"
Source: Ezra Zaid and Azmyl Yunor, 2010a

This sequence is accompanied by soft acoustic guitar during the introductory verse of the song. Such guitar playing is characteristic of Yunor's compositions, which are considered to exhibit the influence of the important American folk musicians Bob Dylan and Neil Young. However, these cosmopolitan facets of the song are nearly immediately countered by the nativised multivocality of the first verse, in which Zaid's American accent is interwoven with the Malaysian enunciation of Yunor:

Going downtown going underground
"What's the best place to get good DVD9's lah macha?"
Well I kinda know a guy in Chinatown
"Petaling Street? Aisey-man situ selalu kena raid lah beb"
(Petaling Street? Oh no, man, that place is always raided)
But my taukay always brings all the prices down
"Okay-lah, but that one if kena saman cannot get diskaun wan"
(Ok, but if that place gets a summons we cannot get a discount.)
It's all settled coz the guy is from my hometown
"Wah. Eh can help settle mine ah? Dah bertimbun-lah, bro."
(Wow, can you help settle mine? It's piling up, bro)

Source: Ezra Zaid and Azmyl Yunor, 2010b

Note: Text in the bracket is the author's translation

With Point Blanc and Yogi-B, the emphasis was on the evolution of the artist as an individual and the integration of the global hip-hop recording industry, which was presented against a background of global capitalism and cultural materialism. In contrast, here, there is an immediate engagement with the dialectics of resistance to global capitalism, which commences with the issue of digital piracy. Significantly, in the dialogue between the two singers, the seemingly cosmopolitan character is well informed regarding the whereabouts of

the invincible DVD pirate, the bane of the local authorities and the multinational media corporations. In this way, subtle echoes of Scott's concept of "everyday resistance" using the everyday social networks of concealment, cooperation and coordination (Scott, 1989: 39) become audible within the blatant contravening and dodging of global digital copyright law. The verse ends with references to other illegalities: an unpaid traffic summons and a bribe, which is commonly used to influence public officials. Again, we observe a subtle manifestation of Scott's "tacit conspiracies" (Scott, 1989: 46) because both the lawbreaker and the law enforcer partake in a clandestine ritual of folk culture. One needs only to hear the jaded tone of the vocals to detect the existence of this ritual.

Additionally, whereas the previously discussed rap songs of Point Blanc and Yogi-B reflected the global scope of Malaysian hip hop, here, the musical palimpsest reveals the imprint of a more nativised popular imagination. As the song progresses, it begins to integrate stronger tones of lexical multivocality and includes popular folk dialogues from the nation's the three major ethnic communities:

Hey, it's okay.
We gotta live for a better day (Hey!)
Now we give a little a love, and we're on our way
Kita kaotim everything, *parava-illay* (We settle everything; it's all right)

You say, don't play play
Kita mudah lupa but we say "nay" (Nay!) (We often forget, but we say "nay")
Now we got a little love; keep it on replay
You say semua tak boleh, tapi we all okay aje! (You say all this is not possible, but we are all okay!)

It may be argued that the Indian terms used in the song, particularly *parava-illay* (loosely translated as "it's all right") and *macha* ("brother-in-law"), reflect ethnic tokenism compared with the more predominant Malay and Chinese terms. Nevertheless, the Indian terms increase the visibility of a community that is often marginalised in the Malaysian popular imagination. This aspect of the song is another example of the everyday resistance to formal authority and the guilt-inducing rhetoric of nationalistic propaganda. The song's resistance to the state's anti-racism propaganda reflects the dichotomy between state-defined and everyday social reality. This point is particularly obvious in the progression and culmination of the music video. As with Point Blanc and Yogi-B, the video's imagery corresponds to the element of multivocality. As the video continues, characters of various ethnic backgrounds enter the scene. The video becomes a dramatic spectacle of folk performance art that progresses from the harmonious

space of cheerful engagement to an outbreak of disruptive altercations, then to a period of sleep before camaraderie is restored at the end. In many ways, these scenes are metaphorical rebuttals of the state's interventionist propaganda and firm warning against celebrating such differences. Thus, the video invites the viewer to re-imagine the public spaces that the average Malaysian occupies and to understand them as sites of syncretic multivocality.

The three examples discussed in this section are not representative of the entire spectrum of Malaysian hip hop. However, the examples provide an indication of the multivocal music that is being generated in contemporary Malaysian music halls. The examples clearly reflect "nation language," to use a phrase of the Caribbean poet Edward Kamau Braithwaite, a language which "in its contours, its rhythm and timbre, its sound explosions, it is not English, even though the words, as you hear them, may be English to a greater or lesser degree" (Briault-Manus, 2006).

CONCLUSION

The Malaysian popular music world displays significant multiple trajectories of ethno-musicality of Western and Eastern origins. More significantly, as much as the history of Malaysian popular music reflects pop cosmopolitanism, the cultural multivocality that characterises the Malaysian identity resonates as strongly (if not more strongly) at the core of the nation's popular imagination. The skilful integration of the varied influences of global popular culture creates a music palimpsest that is and will continue to be imprinted with the multifarious signs of syncretic cultural multivocality.

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