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Soundscapes of diversity in the port cities of British Malaya

Cultural convergences and contestations in the early twentieth century

Tan Sooi Beng

Introduction

British colonization brought rapid political, economic and cultural transformations to Malaya in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Port cities such as Singapore, Malacca (now Melaka) and Penang were established as administrative centres for the import and export of products. These cities attracted multiracial and multilingual communities of Europeans, Chinese, Arabs and Indians who sojourned to trade or to work in the tin mines or rubber estates, or to work on the construction of roads and railways. Even Malay-speaking Muslim merchants, religious teachers, journalists, artisans and entertainers who came from the surrounding islands to such port cities represented diverse communities. With the advent of the steamship and the opening of the Suez Canal in the nineteenth century, these port cities became regional hubs for the circulation of cargo, people, print, technology and ideas, as well as popular entertainment. Commercial theatre and dance troupes from Europe, India and China stopped in such cities to entertain a growing and diverse urban population. New media technologies such as the gramophone, cinema and radio broadcasting introduced Anglo-American music and European lifestyles to a variety of audiences.

To sanction their control of Malaya, the British attempted to create the notion of the 'Anglicized Malayan' in the consciousness of the diverse populations of port cities via English education, literature, culture and propaganda, all of which was disseminated through newspapers and radio, as well as film censorship

policies, particularly in the late colonial era (Harper 2001: 275). However, the colonial construct of the 'Anglicized Malayan' was not entirely successful. Educational opportunities, printed materials, travel and transnational trade networks contributed to the emergence of a new middle class that was exposed to a wide variety of political ideas and which contested colonialism in the first half of the twentieth century (Lewis 2016). A multiethnic population debated their own ideas about Malayan identities, nationalisms and decolonization through their respective newspapers, theatrical performances, creative arts and social organizations.

This chapter looks at how the local Malay opera entertainers and musicians negotiated colonial cultural hegemony in British Malaya by fusing Anglo-American theatre and music with local Malay, Chinese, Arabic and Indian elements. Despite living under British colonial rule, they created their own hybrid theatre and music that was disseminated via live performances, gramophone recordings and later radio in British Malaya and in the islands of the Malay Archipelago. The soundscapes of colonial Malayan port cities articulated the merging of diverse cultures and the creation of new mixed identities. Yet, the hybrid sonic cultures that developed in such places were not mere replications of Anglo-American culture. The notion of difference is not simply a set of dichotomies such as colonizer-colonized, European-local or hegemony-resistance. As Homi K. Bhabha (1992) notes, 'hybridity' provides an avenue for local people to challenge imperial cultures and aesthetics. Indeed, local musicians reworked European theatrical and musical genres into a counter-discourse to the dominant colonial culture.

Through hybrid music and Malay song lyrics about progress and self-advancement, as well as multilingual songs about the anxieties of the working classes who lived in these colonial port cities, *bangsawan* performers promoted a vision of local modernity that was cosmopolitan and inclusive. This type of cosmopolitan modernity was built on cultural difference, interculturalism, self-advancement and a sense of connection with others through values (Appiah 2007). It was based on the tenets of European liberal humanism as well as reformist Islam, a modernity that emphasized human agency, autonomy, progress and moral values (Hooker 2000). Not only was this kind of modernity different from the British vision of the 'Anglicized Malayan', it also differed from the narratives promoted by mainstream nationalists who began to essentialize the meaning of *Melayu* (Malayness), linking it to a rigid terrain and 'race' (*bangsa*).

By looking beyond empire-centric and state-dominated auditory histories and suppositions about national borders and identities, this chapter (like this

volume as a whole) contributes to the decolonization of sound studies as a field. Malay music and language have always been mixed and have changed in time and space. The popular imagination of the Malays of the 'Nusantara' in the early twentieth century was hybrid and not bound by the national boundaries that exist today; it articulated performers' experiences of performing, travelling and networking in the region. The Malays of the region referred to this organic type of cultural mixing, particularly in language, as *kacukan* (translated here as 'hybridity') (cf. Andaya 2019; Weintraub 2014). Drawing on alternative sources such as gramophone recordings, oral histories and newspaper reports from the early twentieth century, this chapter shows that external developments such as empire-building, migration, travel, trade networks, communication technologies and the spread of Anglo-American popular music all had a significant impact on the changes and types of hybridity that developed in the music and soundscapes of Malaya's colonial port cities.

Cultural convergences in the Malay opera

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, travelling theatre groups from Europe and other parts of Asia visited Malayan port cities via maritime trade routes. Besides Chinese operas that were performed for temple festivities, vaudeville shows from Europe and Parsee theatre troupes from Bombay (now Mumbai) stopped in Malaya following their tours of China, India and Burma. The foreign groups included the Anglo-American Troubadors,¹ the Stanley Opera and Dramatic Co.² and the Parsi Curzon Theatrical Co. of Calcutta (now Kolkata).³ Additionally, travelling American, British and Japanese cinematograph companies screened silent movies in the cities.

It was at this time that the local *bangsawan* (Malay opera) theatre that toured the islands of the Malay Archipelago emerged. *Bangsawan* (literally meaning 'nobility' in Malay and referring to the main characters) was the first Malay commercial musical theatre in British Malaya that used the proscenium stage and a Western orchestra. *Bangsawan* performers adapted stories and stage conventions from Parsee theatre troupes (Tan 1993). In its heyday prior to the Second World War, well-known *bangsawan* troupes traversed the Straits of Malacca and the South China Sea to perform for diverse populations living in the islands of the Malay Archipelago. In his essay 'The Malay Opera, A Study', published in the *Straits Chinese Magazine*, Shaik Othman bin Sallim (1898) observed that the Malay opera catered to all those who spoke Malay, including

the Jawi Peranakan (locally born Indian Muslims) and Straits Chinese or Baba communities (i.e. local-born Chinese communities who had acculturated to Malay language and culture):

The Malay opera is, as far as I know, the only kind of dramatic performance for the large section of the community speaking the Malay tongue. It is as popular among the Straits Chinese as among the Malay people; and it is no uncommon thing to see the ladies' galleries filled en masse by the Straits Chinese women.

The diverse Malays in the port cities who performed and watched the Malay opera included people from Riau, Sumatra, Borneo, the Malay Peninsula, the southern Philippines and southern Thailand. These Malay-speaking Muslims 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' (literally '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 in the Straits Settlements (Kahn 2006: 174–5).

The owners, managers and performers of the Malay opera came from diverse ethnic backgrounds. The earliest *bangsawan* group, known as the Pushi Indera Bangsawan, was formed by a Jawi Peranakan named Mamat Pushi in Penang; this company performed in the Straits Settlements, Sumatra and Java.⁴ In the early days, this troupe used the Malay lingua franca to stage fairy-tale stories that had been adapted from the repertoire of touring Parsee theatre groups. As the names of the *bangsawan* troupes indicate, these stories were based on the characters and activities of the celestial court of Indra (or, in Malay, 'Indera'). In between scenes, while sets were being changed, extra turns of singing, dancing or comic sketches were performed to the accompaniment of Western instruments. Since its inception, the Malay opera fused cross-cultural elements in the music, costumes, stage settings and props.⁵

Some of the travelling troupes that emerged in the early twentieth century included the Wayang Kassim of Singapore that was started by Shaik Kassim of Bombay; the Wayang Yup Chow Thong of Selangor, which was founded by a Chinese proprietor; and Wayang Tuan Ali, which was founded by a Malay-Muslim from Medan in Sumatra. In the 1900s, these troupes added new stories and styles from Europe and various parts of the world to attract Europeans, Straits Chinese and the other ethnic groups living in port cities under British rule. Wayang Kassim, the Indra Zanzibar Royal Theatrical Co of Singapore, one of the most admired groups to tour the Straits Settlements and the islands of the Malay Archipelago in

the 1900s, was said to have combined the styles of the Dutch East Indies with those of the Pushi Indera Bangsawan of Penang (van der Putten 2014; Cohen 2002). In 1903, the *Straits Echo* newspaper, printed in Penang, reported that Wayang Kassim staged new stories such as 'East Lynne' (2 August), 'Prince Hamlet' (5 August), 'Cinderella' (8 August), 'Edward William' (12 August), 'Romeo and Juliet' (17 August) and 'Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves' (21 September) in 1903.

Furthermore, Wayang Kassim added English language and comic music hall songs from Europe as well as Dutch and Eurasian performers from Batavia in order to attract English-speaking and European audiences.⁶ The newspaper reported that the extra turns, which included three European clowns from Harmston's Circus ('Guillarme, Baby and August') and a Spanish dancer called Lolita, drew Chinese and Malays to the shows.⁷ This type of performance, which incorporated a variety of stories, music and dances from different parts of the world, was fashionable in the popular theatre of the Malay Archipelago in the early twentieth century.

In an article entitled 'Malayan Wayang', Ann Nacter gives an interesting account of how 'Grimm's fairy tales' and 'classic productions such as Hamlet, The Merchant of Venice, Othello, Carmen, Comedy of Errors, A Midsummer Night's Dream, etc, as well as Genevieve of Brabant, Griselda, or East Lynne' were put together through a process of improvisation by *bangsawan* performers, most of whom were not formally educated:

If the piece chosen is an adaptation of one of Grimm's fairy tales, the stage manager calls all the artistes together and reads the story to them, exploring any point that may not be understood in the meantime. When he has finished, and everyone understands the piece in question, the performers are given their respective parts, and told to play the story that same night, which they do by 'gagging', but at the same time keeping to the plot of the play.

Then, as regards the singing – and everybody has to sing – the musicians notice who steps on to the boards and the leader of the band strikes up an air that he knows the particular person can sing, the actor putting in his own impromptu words as he goes along.

When witnessing a Malay play one requires a great deal of imagination, and has to take the actor's word for it when he comes out in front of a street scene, and explains that he has now arrived in a certain country and then perhaps five minutes later comes on the same scene again and sings that he is now 1,000 miles away, and so on. (Nacter 1910)

In order to attract diverse Malay-speaking audiences to their performances, such troupes emphasized novelty and comic interludes. For instance, Wayang Yap

Chow Thong, the Indra Permata Theatrical Co of Selangor, owned by a Chinese proprietor Yap Chow Thong and managed by Abu Bakar, called on audiences to see their new costumes and backdrops, watch Dutch and Malay performers and see their 'comical clowns'.⁸

In an earlier newspaper report in the *Straits Echo* on 19 May 1904, an anonymous reviewer of Wayang Yap Chow Thong praised the 'acting and singing' of the Dutch actresses and the Malay clown who kept the audience amused:

The acting and singing of Miss Dora van Smith, the Queen of King Khoda Dosh, were all that could be desired and elicited loud applause from the audience. . . . During the performance Miss van Cantarfischer, at one time the belle of the Zanibars, sang a song from 'The Geisha' in a most pleasing manner. Mention must also be made of the Clown Abu Bakar who took the part of 'Saudagar Bada Meah' and kept the audience in roars of laughter from start to finish. The play was a decided success and we are glad to notice that several Europeans were present. We hear that another six lady artistes will arrive here in the course of next week, when the public of Penang will be sure of an even better performance. The play tonight will be 'Ali Baba and the 40 Thieves' and another bumper house is expected. (*Straits Echo* 1904)

Another reputable group that toured the region at the turn of the twentieth century was the Wayang Tuan Ali, Wayang Comedy India Ratoe of Medan. This company also boasted of its European actresses who performed tricks during the extra turns:

Interspersed through the performance were some cleverly Japanese conjuring tricks by Miss Sorset and Miss Jahara, who made torn up paper turn into flames, and produced silk handkerchiefs from their empty fingers. . . . A really clever cakewalk was given and I hope will be repeated at our next visit.⁹

The *bangsawan* was popular among diverse Malay speakers not only because of its hybridity but also because it was flexible and could be adapted to the preferences of target audiences in specific locations. To attract Chinese Peranakan audiences in Penang, for instance, it was reported in the local paper, *Straits Echo*, that new stories from Batavia that included Peranakan characters would be introduced. As reported in the *Straits Echo*, Wayang Kassim featured a Chinese Baba character called Kee Ah Sam, as well as his wife Kun Neo in the play 'Radent Adjeng Rohaja' (*Straits Echo* 1906). Chinese legends were also staged. The Alfred Theatrical Company of Selangor staged the Chinese legend 'Aw Chua Pek Chua' (Black and White Snake) in 1928. An advertisement for the show in the *Straits*

Echo on 26 March 1928 called on audiences to 'See the Thunder Pagoda', 'The Broken Bridge', 'The Flying Mountain' and 'The Temple of Golden Mount'.

By the 1920s, *bangsawan* star directors, such as Khairuddin or Dean of the Union Star Opera and Nani of the Gnani Star Opera, began to introduce 'moral and educational stories' to their performances, as well as Malay historical plays in tandem with the rise of Malay nationalism.¹⁰ On 13 December 1926, the Union Star Opera of Singapore advertised, 'An extra special Malay historical play in 4 parts Siti Zubaidah (Produced by Inche Zainol, Directed by K Dean. . . . The greatest of Malay plays).' As a heterogeneous and flexible form, *bangsawan* remained popular in British Malaya until the post-Second World War period.

Hybridity as counter-discourse

Besides incorporating new stories from Europe and other parts of Asia, the Malay opera stimulated the blending of European music with the music of the multiethnic populations of cosmopolitan port cities in British Malaya. Shaik Othman (1898) commented that he heard European songs such as 'Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay', 'Daisy-Bell', 'After the Ball' and 'Two Little Girls in Blue' at the Jawi-Peranakan Theatrical Company from Penang's performance in North Bridge Road, Singapore. He added that the singing was, however, often soft and drowned out by a 'strong orchestra consisting of a trumpet, drum and two fiddles'.

Ann Nacter recalled hearing European tunes such as 'Annie Laurie' or Gounod's 'Serenade' and 'Her Golden Hair Was Hanging Down Her Back' being sung at Malay opera shows. Nacter (1910) added that 'the latest idea' in 1910 was 'to introduce English Music Hall numbers into the night's performance, such as songs, cake-walks, national dances, sketches and the like'. Nevertheless, by the 1920s, vaudeville shows featuring multiethnic actors and actresses performing songs and dances from all parts of the world had become the trend. The Malay orchestra (*orkes Melayu*) comprising instruments such as the violin, trumpet, trombone, clarinet, saxophone and piano was created to accompany *bangsawan* performers. Sometimes the Malay frame drum and Indian *tabla* would also be added if the stories being performed were associated with Malaya or India, respectively (Tan 1993).

The gramophone has left an auditory record of the *bangsawan* songs of the early twentieth century that would otherwise have disappeared. The main companies that recorded Malay music in British Malaya were from Europe and

included the Gramophone Company or His Masters Voice (HMV; this went by the names of 'Chap Anjing' or 'Dog Brand' in Malaya), Beka, Odeon, Columbia Gramophone Company, Pathé (known locally as 'Chap Ayam' or 'Rooster Brand') and Pagoda. HMV was the largest producer of Malay recordings in British Malaya with its own local subsidiaries or sister companies such as Chap Kuching ('Cat Brand') and Chap Singa ('Lion Brand') in the 1930s. Recording engineers from these gramophone companies carried out recording sessions in Singapore, the main port of call for entertainers travelling in the region. As I have shown in earlier work, local agents who selected artists, repertoire and venues assisted recording engineers in their work. The recordings were made on hard wax, and the wax matrices were shipped to factories of various companies to be pressed (Tan 1996/97; Murray et al., 2013). As these records were played in public spaces such as amusement parks, theatres and outside record shops, they were accessible to all types of Malay-speaking audiences in colonial port cities.

Malay folk social and dance music (*ronggeng*) formed a large part of the repertoire that was recorded by these gramophone companies in Malaya in the first half of the twentieth century. These 'song-dance genres' were performed live at Malay and Peranakan social occasions such as weddings and other festivities in various parts of Malaya. They were also staged in the *bangsawan* stories and interludes known as extra turns.¹¹ An analysis of some recordings of Malay songs from the 1920s to the 1950s gives us an idea of the intercultural mixing and cultural convergences that occurred. For instance, 'Chek Siti I'¹² is a *bangsawan* song in which a male singer (H. Dolmat) and a female singer (Miss Saianah) exchange Malay verses (*pantun*). The *ronggeng* ensemble comprising the European violin (*biola*), Malay frame drum (*rebana*) and Malay gong accompanies the singers. The two singers perform the *joget*, a fast and lively dance song that uses a four-beat rhythmic pattern, which juxtaposes units of two notes and three notes played in succession (H. Dolmat and Miss Saianah 1935). It is believed that the Portuguese brought this type of ensemble and music to Southeast Asia when they first arrived in the sixteenth century (Matusky and Tan 2017).

Gramophone companies such as HMV and Pagoda also recorded prominent Malay and Peranakan Chinese *dondang sayang* (love song) singers in the early twentieth century. Stylistically, the *dondang sayang* combines the Western and Malay instruments of the *ronggeng* ensemble, the Malay *asli* social dance rhythmic cycle, Malay *pantun* singing as well as Western triads and the diatonic scale. Singers try to outwit each other in a repartee style using the *pantun* to debate topics of interest such as love, good deeds, business, fruit or the sea in the

Baba (Peranakan) Malay patois. As in 'Dondang Sayang Tanaman 1' (Dondang Sayang about Plants 1), (Miss Piah, Mr Poh Tiang Swee and Mr Koh Hoon Teck, c.1930s), a typical five-bar melody begins all singing that can last for several hours depending on the abilities of the vocalists. The rhythm played by the frame drum (*rebana*) and placements of the gong beats resemble the Malay *asli* rhythmic pattern from the *ronggeng* dance repertoire. As in traditional Malay music, the vocalist sings in heterophony with the violin or *biola* in Malay.

Through *bangsawan* theatre and gramophone recordings, the *ronggeng* social folk music evolved into modern popular genres in the interwar period. In order to appeal to multiethnic urban audiences, new musical arrangements and melodies were composed. The piano often played the parts of the violin and gong 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 Tin Pan Alley musical arrangements disseminated by gramophone records and Hollywood talkies influenced the new *ronggeng* music.

In addition to the Malay and Anglo-American elements, other foreign elements were often added to the recorded *bangsawan* and folk songs of the 1920s to 1950s. 'Tandi Tandi' portrayed Indian influence and was accompanied by a harmonium, *tabla* and piano (Che Tijah c. 1930s). The addition of a short, unmetered introduction (*alap*) by the harmonium, as well as vocal ornamentations, articulated Indian folk and light classical singing styles. 'Gambos Betjerai Kasih' (Gambos Separation of Lovers) (Ahmad CB 1939) had a Middle Eastern flavour that highlighted the use of the Middle Eastern *ud* (called a *gambus* locally) together with small *marwas* hand drums and a cone-shaped drum (*dok*) that played the characteristic four-beat *zapin* rhythm.¹³ The *gambus*, and other instruments such as the accordion, violin and double bass, played an Arabic-type of mode. Another older recording, *Gambos Ya Omar* by Salih, featured the Arabic *zapin* in the village setting in which the vocalist, *gambus*, violin and harmonium performed the melody while the *marwas* executed the *zapin* rhythm (Salih 1911).

Hybridity was a way to contest the dominant colonial culture that was being fostered under British rule. Nevertheless, the idea of variance in the Malay opera was ambivalent as local performers mixed European music with Malay texts, folk tunes and rhythms and added other elements from Chinese, Indian, Javanese and Arabic cultures. In so doing, the *bangsawan* theatre could attract multiracial audiences in port cities. The music also mirrored a Malay entertainment community that was open to and tolerant of other races and

cultures. The performers themselves came from and networked in different parts of the Malay Archipelago.

Education, progress and independence

Gramophone recordings also indicate that Malay popular music based on Anglo-American and Latin American social dance rhythms, such as the waltz, tango, foxtrot and rumba, was widespread in British Malaya. Marches, comic songs (*lagu klakar*) and Hawaiian songs were also recorded. These new songs were originally performed by dance bands at British clubs but were later adopted by local bands in the *bangsawan* extra turns and at cabaret dance halls in Malaya's amusement parks; they were also disseminated through gramophone records, radio broadcasts and films. The new dance music and rhythms appealed to consumers as they were up-to-date and resembled the novel and popular music showcased in films from Europe, Hollywood, Shanghai and India.

Local musicians in British Malaya appropriated Anglo-American music to create their own musical idiom that was 'modern' (*moden*). Even though the new popular music used Tin Pan Alley instrumentation, strophic structure, dance rhythms and the open-throated crooning style of singing, nevertheless, the songs retained specific Malay folk elements and texts. The fusion of Malay social dance rhythms, musical textures, singing styles, drums and other foreign elements led to a local form of modernity – one that was current yet different from the European version.

In fact, the modern songs advocated change; they helped to educate and raise the consciousness of Malay audiences to prepare them for eventual independence. Through Anglo-American-style popular songs, *bangsawan* performers and recording artists contributed to contemporary discourses about reform and the creation of a more progressive or advanced society. These issues were being debated in Malay newspapers and other public texts by modernist reformist Muslims and Malay nationalists in the 1930s and 1940s in British Malaya and throughout the greater Malay world (Kahn 2006).¹⁴ Although the two main nationalist groups advocated different ways forward, both focused 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 vernacular newspapers, journals and new fiction centred on solutions to such problems, the necessity of change and strategies for progress (*maju*) (Hooker 2000; Muliyadi 2004).

Newspapers such as the *Jawi Peranakan* (first published in 1876) and *Warta Malaya* (1936) stressed the importance of education as a vehicle for progress. *Al-Imam* (1906) urged Malays to ‘wake from their slumber’, to work hard, change their behaviour and be active in education, trade, agriculture and the development of the community. In tandem with such discourses, *bangsawan* performers and singers such as the late Ahmad CB called on audiences to ‘wake up from sleep’ and to ‘study’ from his songs. Ahmad CB hailed from Sumatra and was known for his nationalist songs. He used lively (*rancak*) rhythms such as the march, rumba and foxtrot to bring vitality to these songs. 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’ (Ahmad CB 1986).¹⁵ He declared that his performance group staged many songs and stories that called on children to ‘wake up’ (*bangun anak-anak*). When I interviewed him in 1986, he sang the song ‘Bangun Anakku’ (Wake Up My Child) to me, which he had also recorded with Chap Singa in 1938 (Ahmad CB 1938). The song’s lyrics are as follows:

<i>Bangun anakku dari tidurmu</i>	(Wake up my child from your sleep)
<i>Semua kawan-kawanmu sudah menunggu</i>	(All your friends are waiting)
<i>Jikalaunya sudah, segera berpakaian</i>	(If you have woken up, quickly get dressed)
<i>Menuntut ilmu, jangan-jangan dilupakan</i>	(Pursue knowledge, do not forget)
<i>Ini semua demi masa depan.</i>	(All this is for the future).

Ahmad CB’s ‘Bangun Pagi’ (Wake Up in the Morning) – a *kerconcong* foxtrot – was based on the English nursery rhyme ‘Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise’ (Ahmad CB 1947a). In ‘Menuntut Ilmu’ (Claim Knowledge) (Ahmad CB 1947b) – a rumba – Ahmad CB asks ‘children to go to school so that they will be safe, meritorious and become useful to society and can help the old in time to come’.¹⁶

Furthermore, singers advised women to pursue an education so that they could be respected as mothers and leaders of the nation. A vibrant swing, foxtrot rhythm was used in ‘Gadis Malaya’ (Women of Malaya) (A. Rahman c. 1950s), which included the lyrics:

<i>Gadis Malaya, oh</i>	(Women of Malaya, oh)
<i>Belajarlah kamu seakan setia</i>	(Be devoted to your studies)
<i>Majukanlah kamu punyalah cita-cita</i>	(Develop yourselves and have ambitions)
<i>Menjadi pemimpin ibu yang berharga</i>	(To become leaders and mothers of esteem)

Recording artists also sang about the way forward proposed by modernist Islamic reformists. In her analysis of Malay prose fiction, Virginia Hooker (2000: 5, 85) shows that for the new generation of modernist reformists, the 'way forward' was through 'individual initiative' and humanitarian values such as concern for the poor and the marginalized.¹⁷ There was a longing for moral guidance and advice about how to progress. In line with this trend, *bangsawan* troupes staged moral stories, but there was also a considerable increase in songs about virtuous behaviour through the 1930s to the 1950s. Keywords pertaining to values were often printed in the HMV advertisements, catalogues and song lyrics. Showing sympathy (*belas kasihan*) to the less fortunate and to women, and generosity to the needy, was often presented in recorded songs. Singers advised (*nasihat*) audiences to take care of the poor, orphans and their aged parents. Song titles published in recording catalogues in the 1930s and 1940s include 'Kesian' (Pity) (Che Aminah c. 1930s); 'Yatim Piatu' (Orphans) (Mohd. Yatim c. 1930s); 'Yatim yang Miskin' (The Orphan Who Is Poor) (Miss Rambat c. 1930s); and 'Ibu' (Mother) (Mr Jani c. 1930s). Songs about children who were ill-treated by their stepmothers, such as 'Anak Tiri' (Stepchild) performed by the child star Miss Emmy, were also common (Miss Emmy c. 1930s).

Through their songs, the *bangsawan* stars helped to raise the awareness of their audiences 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 (i.e. non-Malay) ethnic groups. For example, Ahmad CB wrote the lyrics and melody of the song 'Malaya' (Malaya) (Ahmad CB 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 groups'¹⁸ (*Filem Melayu*, 1941):

<i>Malaya, tanah pesaka</i>	(Malaya, inherited land)
<i>Malaya, Malaya, maju dan jaya</i>	(Malaya, Malaya, developed and successful)
<i>Malaya, Malaya, indah dan permai</i>	(Malaya, Malaya, precious and beautiful)
<i>Berbagai bangsa hidup aman damai</i>	(Different races living peacefully)

In the 1950s, musicians composed and recorded the first patriotic songs that referred specifically to the formation of a new independent nation. Of the many patriotic songs by Zubir Said, 'Majulah Singapura' (Onward Singapore, 1958) is the most well known of these, as it became the national anthem of Singapore. During this era, Zahara Agus (c. 1930s) was acknowledged for her 'Malaya

Merdeka' (Independence of Malaya) while Ahmad CB encouraged youths to unite and work towards independence in his song 'Pemuda Melayu' (Malay Youths) (Ahmad CB and Osman Ahmad Orchestra c. 1950s):

<i>Pemuda mesti berbakti</i>	(The youths must be devoted)
<i>Membela ibu pertiwi</i>	(Defend the motherland)
<i>Marilah bersama bertegak bersatu</i>	(Let us together stand united)
<i>Merdeka tetaplah Merdeka</i>	(To be free is to attain independence)

Malay recording artists articulated their ideas about modernity, progress and decolonization by composing lyrics that emphasized universal values such as humanity and responsibility towards the disadvantaged, including the working-class poor, orphans and women. They advocated change and ways to achieve independence through education, hard work and unity, as well as moral guidance. By combining pivotal terms employed by nationalists and modernist Islamic reformists in hybrid popular music, such musicians promoted a form of cosmopolitanism that was inclusive of the diverse Malays and immigrants living in the islands of the Malay world. The performers advocated a broader type of Malayness and debated the relationship between Malay nationalism and their regional identity through their songs.

Multilingual songs chiding colonial authorities

Beginning in the 1930s, multilingual comic songs performed in the *bangsawan* extra turns provided an avenue for raising frustrations with the colonial authorities. These songs incorporated topical issues such as the plight of taxi drivers, trishaw men and street hawkers. Such songs were often invigorated by humour in the tone of voice and musical accompaniment. These songs did not use the Malay verse form (as in other *bangsawan* and Malay social dance songs) but were sung in 'bazaar Malay'; they incorporated English, Chinese and Tamil words to speak to multiethnic audiences. As in the modern tracks about change and progress described earlier, these comic songs were also accompanied by upbeat rhythms such as the rumba, foxtrot or tango that were played by dance orchestras.

'Taxi Rumba' (Rumba Taxi) is a lively comic song about the problems faced by taxi drivers (Che Tarminah and Piet S 1939). It is sung as a duet between a female passenger and a male taxi driver in conversational Malay with a sprinkling of English words included. The song informs the audience about a policeman

who often took away the driver's license if his lights were not working or if his number plates disappeared:

<i>Sabarlah nona, lampu tidak nyala</i>	(Be patient lady, [my] lamp is not lighting)
<i>Number belakang tidak ada</i>	(There is no number [plate] at the back)
<i>Gohed lah saja, hari sudah gelap</i>	(Go ahead, the day is getting dark)
<i>Jangan takut kena tangkap.</i>	(Don't wait till the rain comes).
<i>Kena saman saya takut</i>	(I am scared of getting a summon)
<i>Saya khuatir lesen kena chabut.</i>	(I am afraid [my] licence will be confiscated). ¹⁹

After the Second World War, comic topical songs that concerned ordinary working people of all races remained popular and were also sung in Malay films. 'Saudagar Minyak Urat' (The Nerve Oil Merchant) (Aman Ballon King Clown, Nooran Opera and HMV Orchestra c. 1950s); 'Che' Mah Dengan Tukang Becha' (Che Mah with the Trishaw Man) (Aman Ballon c. 1950s); and 'Uncle Murtabak' describe the hardships faced by ordinary peddlers and small businessmen who are inevitably harassed by the police.²⁰ The lyrics for 'Uncle Murtabak' (Mohd. Yatim c. 1950sa), for example, are as follows:

<i>Uncle Murtabak tersalah cakap</i>	(Uncle Murtabak said something wrong)
<i>Mata gelap datang tangkap</i>	(the secret police came to catch him)
<i>Kena masuk dalam lokap</i>	(he had to go to jail)
<i>Central polis tiga tingkat.</i>	([At the] Third Floor of the Central Police Station).

Such comic songs can also be seen as tongue-in-cheek comments on decolonization and the challenges of living in a modern city. The singers mix Malay, English and other languages to mock those who imitate the British by drinking excessively, playing the violin or dancing at cabarets. One song advising the audience about the woes and consequences of excessive drinking, 'Yam Choi Chow', mixes Malay, English and Cantonese (Mohd. Yatim c. 1950sb):

<i>My darling broke my heart</i>	(My darling broke my heart)
<i>Yi kar ngo mo sweetheart</i>	(Now I do not have a sweetheart)
<i>Ngo yo lok soon badan ku tak sehat</i>	(I am ugly, my body is not fit)
<i>Ngo pangkau sama nyamok and moksat.</i>	(I sleep together with mosquitoes and lice).

It is interesting to note that the melody for 'Yam Choi Chow' was adapted from a song featured in the French movie *Sous Les Toits De Paris* (Under the Roofs of Paris) (1930), directed by René Clair. This film had voice and sound in some

parts and was about dance halls in Paris in the late 1920s. The melody must have been a hit in the 1930s as it was appropriated and rendered with different lyrics in various parts of the world. In Germany, the melody was sung during men's drinking sessions.²¹ Mohd. Yatim may have adapted the German version and changed the text to express his thoughts about the consequences of excessive drinking. His version also had comic effects played by brass instruments at the end of each phrase.

Another song which lampoons the common Malay man's attempt to imitate the European is 'Wak Kasban Belajar' (Wak Kasban Learns) (Mohd. Yatim c. 1950sc). In this song, the singer ridicules Wak Kasban who tries to learn Anglo-American dances such as the tango and foxtrot and European instruments such as the violin and saxophone as was the fashion at the time. According to the song, Wak Kasban created such a din at the cabaret that the manager threw him out. He also made so much noise playing his musical instruments until late at night that the neighbours reported him to the police. This song resembled some of the cartoons that were featured in the Malay newspapers and which criticized locals such as Wak Ketok who tried to mimic British ways (Muliyadi 2004).

P. Ramlee, who dominated the Malay-language cinema field and recorded more than 350 songs in the 1950s and 1960s, was also known for his multilingual comic songs. In both his films and songs, P. Ramlee combined humour and conversational Malay to portray the contradictions faced by ordinary Malays in a modernizing society.

Multilingualism in such songs exemplified everyday realities and social relations among the working class in colonial society. By using several languages – colloquial Malay (the common language in the urban and rural areas), Hokkien, Cantonese, Hindi and English – such comic songs became relevant to diverse communities. The use of Western popular tunes, dance rhythms and musical instruments gave the songs a feeling of modernity and progressiveness. Through humour in the lyrics, singers were able to expose the problems of the common man regardless of race, be they taxi drivers, *murtabak* sellers or youths adjusting to life and the authorities in the city. The comic songs engaged audiences in social transition; audiences could laugh at their own faults and outdated customs. Humour also helped to ease anxieties about modernity and change in an urban colonial environment. By focusing on the similarities rather than the differences of the ethnically diverse urban population, the comic songs mediated inter-ethnic interaction in a plural society.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown that the soundscapes of diversity in the port cities of British Malaya prior to Malaya's independence were derived from cultural convergences as well as contestations in the first half of the twentieth century. The vitality of these soundscapes stemmed from the creativity of musicians who lived in a period of change and their openness to the variety of cultures around them. Such musicians created modern popular music by combining European musical instruments, Anglo-American dance rhythms, and Malay and other folk music with song texts about Malay progress and the problems of the common man. Hybridity became a means of challenging the colonial culture that was being disseminated via radio and film as well as the British construction of an 'Anglicized Malayan' identity. However, the notion of difference was ambiguous and portrayed a multiethnic intertextuality that was localized. Unlike the exclusive music-making of the British colonizers, this new hybrid music was performed live at amusement parks and was accessible to people of all classes and backgrounds, Malay and non-Malay, throughout the Malay world.

Furthermore, artists communicated a form of vernacular modernity that was cosmopolitan, open to the transnational exchange of culture, and crossed boundaries of class and ethnicity. They performed a type of 'colonial cosmopolitanism' that was 'rooted', which they experienced as they travelled and created networks in the Malay Archipelago where there was no rigid interpretation of the Malay *bangsa* (race), identity or language (Anderson 2012). Such performers interacted with and married into the many and varied ethnic groups living in this archipelago; they spoke and performed in a variety of languages and dialects. Many were of mixed ancestry. They spent long periods of time outside Malaya, exchanging knowledge with and learning from one another as well as from performers from China, India, the Middle East, Europe and the Philippines who visited these port cities. Mobile *bangsawan* performers absorbed new ideas about education, morality and progress that circulated widely in the region. They mixed European and Malay music with those of the diverse ethnic groups with whom they interacted to disseminate these cosmopolitan ideals. They used Malay, the local lingua franca that had no fixed form at this time, and merged it with other languages to voice their opinions about the problems of the common man of different races in the port cities. This type of modernity differs from the present-day mainstream Malay ethno-nationalist narrative that essentializes the notion of Malayness (*Melayu*).

Notes

- 1 As per an advertisement in the *Straits Echo*, 23 March 1904.
- 2 As per an advertisement in the *Straits Echo*, 30 June 1904.
- 3 As per an advertisement in the *Straits Echo*, 15 June 1904.
- 4 Details can be found in *Bintang Timor*, 29 November 1894.
- 5 See Tan (1993) for an in-depth analysis of the historical development, dramatic elements, backdrops, extra turns, dance and music of *bangsawan* theatre or the Malay opera in early-twentieth-century Malaya.
- 6 As per reports in the *Straits Echo*, 15 October 1903.
- 7 As per reports in the *Straits Echo*, 15 June 1907.
- 8 As per advertisements in the *Straits Echo*, 1 February 1907.
- 9 As per advertisements in the *Straits Echo*, 8 October 1906.
- 10 Advertisements in the *Straits Echo*, 12 November 1926 and 26 October 1929.
- 11 For analyses of *bangsawan* songs and Malay social dance music, see Tan (1993) and Matusky and Tan (2017). In *bangsawan*, slow-paced *asli* songs were often sung as *lagu nasib* (songs of fate) or *lagu sedih* (sad songs) 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.
- 12 The recordings and annotations of 'Chek Siti I', 'Wak Daing' and 'Gambos Ya Omar' are available in Murray et al. (2013). This box set has a collection of four CDs and ninety tracks of 78 rpm recordings from Burma, Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia. Other recordings analysed are from the collections of Naina Merican and Jaap Erkelens.
- 13 The Malay *zapin* is an adaptation of the Arabic *zapin* that was brought to the state of Johore (now Johor) by Arab immigrants. The dance was performed by men only in the early days. The *zapin* was modernized and adapted by *bangsawan* performers for Middle Eastern stories. New *zapin* dance motifs and choreography were created for both men and women dancers in *bangsawan*. Western instruments like the piano, violin and double bass were added (Matusky and Tan 2017).
- 14 Milner (1995) discusses the various intellectual debates in Malay public texts in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. 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. The mainstream nationalists gained mass support in the post-war period and led Malaya to independence in 1957 (Kahn 2006: 68, 96).

- 15 'pulau ke pulau jalan sambil cari makan sambil kita bimbingan anak-anak, bimbing masyarakat supaya boleh maju sikit' (Ahmad CB 1986).
- 16 'anak-anak yang mesti bersekolah supaya selamat berjasa kemudian menjadi berguna kepada masyarakat dan dapat membantu tua kemudian hari' (Ahmad CB 1986).
- 17 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).
- 18 'Mengandongi pasokkan bunyi-bunyian dan nyanyi suara ramai ia-itu termasuk-lah ahli-ahli daripada bangsa Melayu, China, India, Eurasia, Manila, Portuguese dan Inggeris'.
- 19 'Gohed' was sung in English.
- 20 A *murtabak* is a stuffed pancake that is sold throughout Malaysia, as well as in other countries in Southeast Asia, South Asia and the Middle East.
- 21 I thank Uwe Patzold who alerted me to this and pointed out that the melody of the French song was probably adapted by the Germans in the song 'Lech Misch Am Arsche, Marie!' (Lick Me on the Arse, Marie!), a type of 'vernacular men's party song' often sung during drinking sessions where vulgar words were used (Uwe Patzold, personal communication, 28–29 September 2012). A version of 'Lech Misch Am Arsche, Marie'/'Sous Les Toi[t]s De Paris' was recorded on vinyl record by the German singers 'Klaus und Ferdie' (<http://www.discogs.com/Klaus-Und-Ferdie-Das-Berglandecho-Ein-Abend-Auf-Der-Heidi/master/257358>). According to Patzold, the texts of this recording include some words which refer to the Second World War.

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