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Ethnic Labelling: Malaysian Perception on Indian Performing Arts and its Impact on Malay Music

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Introduction

Referring to the historiography regarding Indian cultural influx into the cultures of Malaya, evidences for the migration of Indian music and dance events to Malaya before nineteenth century are rarely found except for some Indian Muslim practices related to festive processions.¹ Thus, some aspects of music coming from India might have been adapted by people living on the territory of present day Malaysia. The state of Malaysia promotes ghazal Johor as a national heritage labelling it as a heritage of Malay culture and at the same time practitioners of this repertoire say it is as an Indian music legacy in Malaysia.

This study attempts to reconsider the vaguely known and well known adaptations of musical features originating from India found in current Malaysian music traditions discussing how and why they were labeled as Indian, Malay, or Malaysian, and what are the actual ethnic and ethnic approaches in recognizing them as being of national significance. In the discussion, this study will refer to academic literature and public discourses supported by interviews carried out with musicians and audience. In addition, some musical features of ghazal Johor are exemplarily analyzed that may imply to what extent musical features can be traced that are considered being 'Indian'. By doing so, this paper introduces some ways of identifying adaptations of Indian music cultures in music practiced in Malaysia, as well as the perception of Indian music among musicians and their audiences in Malaysia. This study is mainly based on constant comparison and fieldwork observations made in the last two years, supported by discussion of literature and musical practice.

¹ One of it might be *gendang keling* that is found being historically related to *taziya* as it was brought to Sumatra and from there to other places in Southeast Asia (Martarosa, 2002).

The official website of Yayasan Warisan Johor (Johor Heritage Foundation) provides a brief description about Malay ghazal emphasizing its origin as Arab and its development in Malaya; the description includes that music instruments i.e. sitar, sarangi, harmonium and tabla were used in the early stage; later sitar and sarangi were replaced with violin and ud coming from the West and Arab respectively and only harmonium and tabla are still remaining in the repertoire; meter of ghazal has a similar resemblance with Qasida and the melody is similar to Hijaz (a Maqam mode)². Surprisingly, nowhere in this description is said that ghazal has anything to do with 'India' though the names of Indian music instruments are mentioned without attributing them to India. Taking this example as a departure, this paper discusses the reasons for labelling music genres in Malaysia to a specific ethnic group and its consequences and non-ethical phenomenon.

Islamic Identities in Malaysia

The Arab minority was much privileged in Malaysia in comparison to other Muslim minorities coming from other foreign countries. This is because Islam is deeply rooted among Malays as 'Arab religion' and therefore Arab people could easily be a part of the Malay community through various means, especially after the time of Islamic resurgence in the late nineteenth century and again in the 1970s (Jan Stark, 2006:395). In contrast, the Malays' perception on the majority of Indians is something like secondary or outranked people³. There might be several reasons for this phenomenon which is partly discussed in this paper. One objective of this paper is to discuss whether the non-Indian Malaysian perception on the Indian population in Malaysia as partly inferior ethnicity has an impact on the perception and reception of Indian performing arts in Malaysia as well.

South Indians represent the majority among Indian influx in Malaysia who were widely brought in by the British as plantation workers and other lower level occupations as the majority of South Indians were able to be convinced to do hard work for low wages. Among all Indians, there are groupings like Mamak, Hindu, Sikh and Christian and many other

² Last retrieved on 01 May 2014 from <http://www.ywj.gov.my/warisanv2/index.php/seni-muzik/ghazal>.

³ Daniels claims "As *non-Bumiputera* immigrants, manual laborers and residents of state out side of the city centers, "Indians" are ranked lowly in Malaysian society" (Daniels, 2005:48).

overlapping categorizations based on skin color, caste and economic hierarchies (Meddegoda, 2014). Mamaks, the Muslim Indian Malaysians strive to achieve the same status as Malay Muslims who are socially, politically and economically benefited for having 'Bumiputera' status in Malaysia. The various attempts made by Mamaks to be treated with equal status have been refused by the administration provided that Mamaks' identity is complicated in the perspectives of intra-Indian ethnicity, language and social hierarchies which are themselves far dominating ethnic, cultural and historical identities rather than the 'Malaysian Muslim' identity.⁴

Stark (2006:396) points out the dilemma of Indian Muslims in Malaysia "yet as Jawi Peranakan or descendants of the Darah Keturunan Keling (DKK), Indian Muslims have been marginalized as the underprivileged Mamak of the lower cast and working class groups. Islam has not been able to bridge these differences; it has rather accentuated the diverging ethnic and religious loyalties in the multicultural setting of Malaysia" (Stark, 2006:396). The latter statement of Stark seems to be imprecise as Emby (2014) remarks that "Jawi Peranakan⁵ associated with Penang is different from Mamak and Indian Muslim. Mainly, Jawi Peranakan do not speak Tamil and tend to be to certain degree Malay in culture thus they are regarded as bumiputera".⁶ In comparison to the Chinese ethnicity in Malaysia, Malays are the biggest embracers of Indian cultural features coming through popular media and Indian influx such as architecture, fashion (female Salwar and Panjabi

⁴ Ibid. "Mamak" is the high-level category used to refer to the "Indian Muslim" minority of Malaysia. They are a minority in both the "Indian" and "Muslim" communities. In the "Indian" community, they are an enigma because they are not Hindu, and in the "Muslim" community, they are an enigma because they are not "Malay". Because they are not "Malay", they are not considered to be "pure Muslims", and are stigmatized as "Indian" converts to Islam. People considered "Mamak" to be one type of *mualaf* or converts to Islam (*saudara baru*); converts with some degree of Indian ancestry" (Daniels, 2005:52).

⁵ "Peranakan can be defined as an ethnic group whose members are believed to be offsprings of ethnic/race-mixing due to practice of interethnic marriages between non-indigenous minority group and indigenous majority groups. By using Peranakan as an ethnic category, societies in Malay Archipelago are seen as openly accepting the amalgam as part of their own 'flesh and blood'" (Shamsul A.B., Giokhun Pue, 2011:241).

⁶ "If one of the parents is Muslim Malay/Orang Asli as stated in Article 160 (2) Federal Constitution of Malaysia; thus the child is considered as a Bumiputra". Last retrieved on 29 August 2014 from http://online.uitm.edu.my/takrif_bumi.cfm.

suites), cuisine (roti, dosai, and many other recipes) and various performing arts. Among many varieties of Indian performing arts, Bollywood type dance and music have largely influenced Malay entertainment preferences and had comparably less influence on Chinese.⁷

In the context of cultural preferences, the Malays are naturally closer to the Indian culture although the Arabic Islamic ideology has tremendously transformed Malays' preferences into those coming from the Arab world. Stark (2006: 396) puts it "Arab-Malay relations dating back to the early times of inter-Asian trade have always been seen as a rather one-sided affair in which the Islamic periphery has profited from the knowledge, religious "correctness" and cultural impact of the Arab heartlands" (Stark, 2006:396). Therefore Malays engender to show their inclination towards Arabic culture irrespective of really experienced interests (also Beeman, 2011; Othman, 2002; Provencher, 1975).

Viewpoints on Other Cultures

In general, as can be easily observed, Malays are not unaware on their culture and what specific cultural features are related with which country or which local region. Interestingly, both Malays and Chinese are especially able to differentiate regional varieties of food, music, and other cultural features from another region within Malaysia, but they are naturally ignorant towards differentiating regional differences of foreign cultural features for example Bharat Natyam is perceived as the Indian dance rather than identifying it as a dance genre of South India; perception on harmonium and tabla as Indian music instruments rather than understanding them affiliating to North India or Hindustan. In Malaysia, citizens are used to recognize peoples through political perspectives following the government's policies in distributing privileges⁸ which cause ethnic

⁷ Willford mentions "Malays watch Hindi movies and purchase Hindi audiocassettes. The influence of North Indian music on Malay film and popular music is profound. Malays generally consider North India to be more "civilized" than South India. Those Malays who visit India as tourists will invariably visit the North with its Mughul splendor (...) The preference for the North over the South is also due to the presence of Tamil "coolie" labor, which has created a perception of cultural backwardness in colonial and postcolonial racial discourses" (Willford, 2007:312).

⁸ Chee Kiong Tong writes "The post-independent NEP (New Economic Policy) that was introduced in 1971 was supposed to achieve national unity through the proper distribution of wealth (Gomez, 2000). However, it was arguably the final nail that

segregation for example people coming from India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Bangladesh are considered as one group who has same genetic, historical, and social backgrounds and they are inferior by nature.⁹

Showing ignorance towards understanding of intra-Indian cultural differences by non-Indian Malaysians can be partly seen as inferiorization due to lack of exposure to intra-Indian cultures and communities in Malaysia. In fact, intra-ethnic and cultural difference among the Indian population is itself significantly sensitive to each Indian group in many perspectives for example Sri Lankan Tamils prefer to be seen distinctively from South Indians for social and hierarchical reason that Sri Lankan Tamils were hired in Malaya by British for educational and clerical purposes whereas most of South Indians were brought for working as indentured laborers under lower payment scales. North Indians are unhappy when they are counted equally with South Indians provided that North Indians consider themselves as Aryans bearing fair complexion compared to the dark complexion of the Tamils who are labeled as Anarya or Dravidian in India. Stark speculates that “despite the fact of not having a “protector” to defend their interests, the Indians emerged from a much greater variety of social and ethnic backgrounds, unlike the mostly homogeneous group of rural peasantry-oriented Malays”. However, always the people whose economic and social status is lower are endangered in Malaysia as Jähnichen (2010) also partly agrees that in Malaysia “one of the dark spots was to be born as a descendant of a Tamil plantation worker” (Jähnichen, 2010:47). As a consequence of being Malaysian Indians’ descendants coming from India, they tend to retain their historical relevancies to ancestral regions in India by keeping themselves updated with their mother cultures through media for instance Tamil speaking Malaysians watch Tamil films and prefer listening to Tamil songs whereas North Indians prefer

cemented Malay *bumi* hegemony in all aspects of Malaysian life because it granted special concessions and privileges to Malays over all the other races” (Chee Kiong Tong 2010:95; Gomez, 2000; Tan, 2000).

⁹ Saw and Kesavapany state that “The definition of ‘Chinese’ has always been quite clear-cut: people of Chinese descent regardless of their country of birth or citizenship. The term ‘Indians’ has not been consistently defined in past Censuses, but it is now employed to refer to persons from the Indian subcontinent such as Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, and Sri Lankans. This definition, also disregarding citizenship or birthplace, makes sense because these people display common social and cultural traits, and hence similar demographic characteristics.” (Saw and Kesavapany 2006: 12-13).

everything of Bollywood. However, it is a noteworthy phenomenon that non-Indian population in Malaysia has a preference more likely towards Bollywood products, Bollywood songs and dance if they are given a choice from all Indian film stuffs.

Language of Indian entertainment	In India preferred by	In Malaysia preferred by
Hindi	Hindi speaking populations, other North Indians, South Indians	North Indians, South Indians, Malays, Chinese, Others
Tamil	Tamil speaking populations, other South Indians	Tamil speaking populations, other South Indians
Telugu	Telugu speaking population	Telugu speaking population
Bangla	Bangla speaking population	Bangla speaking population
Malayalam	Malayalam speaking population	Malayalam speaking population

Figure 1: music preferences of ethnicities in Malaysia according to the medium of language as observed in some urban areas of West Malaysia, 2012-2014.

It is apparent that various performing arts coming through Bollywood movies are easily digested by the non-Indian population in Malaysia especially their melodramatic story, fabulous dance and fascinating song. Indeed, the music and dance elements used in Bollywood are not only Indian but also largely Western, and partially others like African, American and Arabian. However, to non-Indians in Malaysia, Bollywood songs and dance are Indian because people and language employed in these movies are Indian and these movies are produced in India. It would be quite precise if non-Indian Malaysians would at least perceive that Bollywood is one of many film industries in India and they produce mostly films in Hindi language including songs and dance which are not always Indian. This is also because generally privileged ethnicities in Malaysia are reluctant to be

critical in understanding divergences of performing arts coming from India for political, social and religious reasons. Most of foreign elements adapted in Malaysia are today vaguely unknown due to Malaysians are lacking of interest in knowing and unbiasedly documenting substantial information of foreign borrowings (Yusof, 2010). Therefore various people in Malaysia, mainly Malays, are used to adapt Indian cultural elements by appropriating them to the Malay social and cultural requirements as veteran Bangsawan dramatist Rahman B. claims by saying “our people (*orang kita*) like to imitate, take from others and make it ours”.¹⁰ If seen from the perspective of actual perception, the way how and where origins of cultural items are located make a strong point since the original place implies ethnic, social and religious qualities.

Cultural item / attribute	Actual place or most used place	Malaysian perception
ghazal	North India and Pakistan	came to Malaysia from Arabia or India
harmonium	North India	Indian music instrument
tabla	North India	Indian music instrument
Hindi songs	North India	Indian songs or Bollywood songs
keherwa and dadara tala	North India	Indian tala, or Indian tempo
mridangam	South India	Indian drum
Parsi theatre	North India	Persia
North Indian	Being in North India and Pakistan	Being from Bangladesh
South Indian	Being in South India	Indian ¹¹

Figure 2: Observed degree of understanding Indian performing arts elements in Malaysia and British Malaya.

¹⁰ Rahman B. in an interview with Jähnichen & Loke (2012).

¹¹ The last two rows according to Ghulam-Sarwar Yusof (2014, ARCPA02662).

Before the Parsi theatre was performed in Pulau Pinang and Singapore, there were some local theatrical genres practiced in Peninsular Malaysia and some elements of those theatre genres were integrated in *Bangsawan* as well. Parsi theatre troupes included Hindustani musicians who provided music support to the theatre with harmonium, tabla and sitar (Rahman B., 2012). After the Parsi theatre troupes finished their time in Malaya, some handful of counterfeit theatre groups emerged in which many local and western music elements were amalgamated. In first instances, these theatres were accompanied by Indian musicians and later their Malaysian disciples who learned from Hindustani musicians during their stay in Malaya. As an assumption on the emergence of ghazal in Malaya, it is not wrong to say that Hindustani ghazal was implanted in Malaya by Hindustani musicians who travelled throughout the Malay world accompanying Parsi theatre performances (van der Putten, 2009). People from various ethnicities and hierarchies in Malaya came to watch Parsi theatre and its local counterfeits and the audience enjoyed whatever was performed as there were no other comparable alternative entertainment events at that time in Malaya (Rahman B., 2012).

Ethnic segregation was not yet in the hands of Malayan political and religious leading groups during the British colonial period when these theatres performed though there are arguments that ethnic segregation was introduced by the British when Indians were settled on estates, Chinese in mining areas and urban areas and Malays encouraged to stay in the rural areas and continue to cultivate rice (Hirschman, 1986). However, people needed entertaining events and theatre troupes needed audiences and therefore whatever was performed in an acceptable shape was socially and economically successful in British Malaya. Rahman B. who was actively performing in the mid of the last century says “we wanted crowd (audience), the audience came and wanted to watch (a play), Malays (audience) did not care what we were performing, as long as it was good” (Rahman B., 2012). Thus during the British period, many North Indian performing art forms were introduced in Malaya through Parsi theatre performances and some of them were adapted to the Malay music culture. Ghazal is known as an adaptation of Hindustani ghazal since harmonium and tabla is still used in Johor ghazal settings. Some narratives told by musicians and admirers can be found in early newspapers describing Pak Lomak and his talents and contribution in propagating ghazal Melayu

Johor¹²; besides there is scientific literature that informs about Hindustani influence on Ghazal Melayu¹³. There are some musicians and scholars who biasedly proclaim that ghazal Melayu Johor has come from Arabia (Bauer, 2006); they simply disregard the musical content, music instruments, history, and functions of ghazal Melayu Johor¹⁴.



Figure 3: traditional setting of ghazal Melayu ensemble. (Photo by Gisa Jähnichen, 2013. Johor Baru.)

Example: Ghazal Melayu Johor as a Tradition

Ghazal Melayu Johor has not gone through tremendous changes unlike other traditional music cultures in Malaysia such as joget and dondang sayang in which electronic music instruments and modern singing and playing techniques were incorporated. Ghazal Melayu Johor might be the ideal example that carries historical and cultural information since Parsi theatre was performed in Malaya (van der Putten, 2009). The most theoretical and pragmatic approach of finding Hindustani elements in Malay ghazal might be through looking into the music content of ghazal Johor played in live concerts and in private settings. The following

¹² Aishah S.A. (disciple of Pak Lomak), Cik Tek Abdul Razak (wife of Pak Lomak), and retired brigadier-general Datuk Ali (a friend of Pak Lomak) recollect their experience with Pak Lomak in an article published in *New Strait Times* on 09 May, 2001.

¹³ See Rohaya Ahmad, (2007), Tan and Matusky (2004), Jähnichen (2014).

¹⁴ Clear evidence informing the origin of ghazal in Malaya is not yet encountered. Therefore, the statements which confirm that ghazal was brought to Malaya from Arabia can be seen as biasedly informed by some musicians and scholars.

transcription of a ghazal performance is representing the nature of ghazal Melayu Johor and illustrating some Hindustani elements which are indeed blurred and Malayized throughout a time span of more than a century. Still, a few Hindustani melodic shapes can be found in Malay ghazal transcriptions. Some melodic shapes which are frequently used in Hindustani music practices are named as kan, khatka, and murkhi. “A” indicates kan, “B” indicates both khatka and murkhi in the shown transcription (figure 4).

Figure 4: Example of Malay ghazal: harmonium (Salleh Arshad) and vocal line (Wahid Tasmir) in ghazal Pak Ngah Balik (Transcription by Chinthaka Prageeth Meddegoda)¹⁵.

Conclusion: Ethnic Labels in Indian Performing Art Forms in Malaysia

Considering all arguments made in this paper, it is possible to posit an idea that Malay and Chinese populations in Malaysia consider the proprietorship of a performance genre through specific measurements such as the people who perform or taught it, the language used, and the place where it is mostly performed; these attributes are confined to a larger geographical area for example Malaysians perceive Bollywood as Indian, ghazal as Indian, harmonium and tabla as Indian, and all people coming from the

¹⁵ Transcription is previously published by the author (Meddegoda, 2013: 230).

Indian subcontinent are Indian, and all of them are economically, culturally, socially and genetically somehow pretty much the same¹⁶.

The creation of ethnic labels carries the signature of the British power in order to simplify cultural explanations that later were partly followed by leading Malay groups and some Chinese in Malaysia for various reasons as discussed in this paper. However, promoting a deeper knowledge on performing arts of all different populations as well as a broader understanding of their history on the territory of present Malaysia would have a greater impact on mutual acceptance through social recognition (Abraham et al. 2002). Not everything can be looked at through the mere light of admiration in the name of the music industry and of an imagined Bollywood success since joint human values have to grow through respecting differences.

The cultural knowledge that was transformed between generations is under serious threat of losing rooted relationship as a consequence and an impact of colonization, religious filtration, and imprecise ethnic labelling on various performing arts. In fact traditional aspects of music have been evolving over the time along with the various human preferences and environmental changes. Besides, there were many efforts being undertaken to preserve them in various ways such as documenting, archiving, reviving and revitalizing past traditions in order to connect with the history of identities. However, we are still able to look into our past through logical assumptions and general factors, in addition to historical sources. Any traditional performing art is a living carriage of historical and cultural knowledge being conveyed over generations through aural transmission and human behavioral patterns. What we really need is to avoid that labelling of various traditional performing arts through prejudices resulting from political, religious and other rather non ethical hierarchical world views.

¹⁶ Official lenses of ethnicities in Malaysia might have considerable influence on Malaysians' general perception on Indians for example one of Malaysian government statistic practices (Distribution of Foreign-Born Population by Country of Birth, 1970–2000) shows that people coming from India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh were summarized as South Asians and the other countries are mentioned by country name i.e. Indonesia, China, Thailand, Philippines, Singapore and Others (Swee-Hock Saw, 2007: 41).

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