

P. Ramlee's Music: An expression of local identity in Malaya during the mid-twentieth century

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Abstract

Tan Sri P. Ramlee's (1929-1973) music dominated the popular music scene in Malaya (prior to 1957 when Malaysia became independent) during the mid-twentieth century. The local communities during his time were captivated by his velvety crooning voice and musical style. P. Ramlee's music featured strong influences from Western tonality, yet exuded the musical aesthetics of the cultures inherent in Malaya. His music was influenced by the demands and aesthetics of urban entertainment, the rich multi-cultural society and the socio-political atmosphere. Many of P. Ramlee's songs were influenced by the background of its directors who suited his songs to the themes and storyline of their films. The interplay between these various power structures were important in shaping P. Ramlee's music. In this article, I argue that although P. Ramlee's music mainly utilised Western musical instruments, tonality, and harmonies, his music was also localised to the flavour of the Malay, Chinese, Indian and Arabic communities through the utilisation of rhythmic patterns and melodic modes associated with these communities. I examine the unique ways in which these culture related rhythms and modes were infused into a Western tonality and temperament. In this article, I argue that P. Ramlee's music embodies and manifests the local identities that were already eclectic in nature.

Keywords: eclectic music, colonialism, localisation, multi-culturalism, syncreticism,

Abstrak

Muzik Tan Sri P. Ramlee (1929-1973) mendominasi suasana muzik popular di Malaya (sebelum Malaysia mendapat kemerdekaan daripada British dalam 1957) dalam pertengahan abad kedua-puluhan. Komuniti tempatan pada masa itu terpedaya dengan suara *crooning* serta stail muzikal P. Ramlee. Muzik P. Ramlee memperlihatkan pengaruh unsur tonaliti Barat yang kuat, tetapi ia juga memaparkan unsur-unsur estetika muzikal budaya tempatan di Malaya. Muziknya dipengaruhi oleh permintaan dan estetika hiburan kawasan bandar, masyarakat pelbagai budaya dan suasana sosio-politik. Kebanyakan lagu P. Ramlee dipengaruhi oleh latar belakang pengaruh filemnya yang menyesuaikan komposisi lagu kepada tema dan jalan cerita filem mereka. Interaksi struktur-struktur kuasa ini penting dalam pembentukan struktur muzik P. Ramlee. Dalam artikel ini, saya berhujah bahawa muzik P. Ramlee memiliki dan memanifestasikan identiti masyarakat tempatan yang pada masa itu telah pun berciri eklektik.

Kata Kunci: kepelbagaian budaya, *localisation*, muzik eklektik, penjajahan, sinkretisme

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Introduction

The music of every culture embodies the interaction of people from different cultural backgrounds, worldviews and philosophies. Throughout history, these people have encountered each other through travel, migration, trade, settlement, war and conquest. In time, layers of different cultural practices influencing musical performances intertwine, forming the local musical styles of a specific place. In the mid-twentieth century, the interaction between Western, Indian, Arabic and Chinese cultures formed the unique local identity of Malaya. I posit that P. Ramlee's songs are an expression of the local identity during that era in the history of Malaysia.

Initially, the influence of Western music in particular its style, tonal system, instrument in non-Western cultures was lamented over in the Ethnomusicology discipline. It was perceived as the watering-down of the unique, exotic and original tonal systems of non-Western cultures—a “cultural grey out” was even suggested (Nettl 1983, 2005). Western music tonal systems were thought to have replaced the musical elements of flexibility in vocal production, pitch system, modal progressions and cultural distinctiveness of non-Western music. The colonial years in pre-Independent Malaysia were dominated by Western music education and performance. Co-curricula activities in government schools comprised marching bands, choirs, brass bands, wind orchestras and string ensembles. The ability to read and perform Western music was a symbol of class status.

In the recent decades, the discipline began to recognise the unique music produced from cultural interaction as a result of migration, colonialism, regionalism, modernisation or globalisation (Heins, 1985; Romero, 2001; Weintraub, 1983; Wong & Elliot, 1994). Heins (1985) argued that *kroncong* music was the result of Western and local synthesis, whilst Weintraub (1983) discussed how reggae music from Jamaica became localised by Hawaiians into a music genre categorised as Jawaiian music. Wong (1994) discussed local agency in Filipino American rap music. Nettl (2005) suggested how, “The hybrids and mixes resulting from intercultural contact could be interpreted as enrichment, as easy as pollution, and old traditions as a class not simply disappeared” (p. 434).

Among the researchers who have examined P. Ramlee's music are Ahmad (2005) and Yusnor (2005) who focused on the lyrics of his songs, and Mohd Hafitz (2005) who examined the melodic structures of *Getaran Jiwa*, an iconic representation of P. Ramlee's works. There has yet to be published any thorough musical analysis of the rhythm and scales/modes in his music. P. Ramlee's music is integrally Western-based but he infused many foreign rhythmic patterns from the Western world such as rumba, samba, cha-cha-cha, beguine and waltz. He also combined foreign rhythms such as the *zapin* and *masri* from the Middle East, *inang* from India and the local *asli* rhythm into his music (See Table 1). P. Ramlee also incorporated scales/modes from Arabic and Chinese music, and excerpts from Western popular tunes into his music.

This article highlights the local essence inherent in the rhythm and scales/modes of P. Ramlee's music. It examines how P. Ramlee merged Western, Indian, Middle Eastern and Chinese local musical elements into his music through the transfer of discrete musical traits and syncretism (Kartomi 1981; Nettl 1985). The transfer of single or more discrete musical traits such as the incorporation of musical instruments, the adoption of melodic idioms or rhythmic motives from one culture to another is a continuous process in musical production. According to Kartomi (1981), the transfer of discrete musical traits does not create revolutionary changes and can be regarded as a preliminary prerequisite for eventual musical transculturation (p. 236). Syncretism refers to the “fusion of elements from diverse cultural sources” and was a term largely used in the 1960's and 1970's (Nettl, 1983, p. 440). Mixed and hybrid styles may occur when sources are similar, compatible, and share certain central traits. In P. Ramlee's music, the transfer of discrete musical traits and syncretism is observed in the utilisation of musical instruments from various cultural sources, such as the violin, saxophone, accordion, trumpet, double bass, conga, bongo (Western) *rebana*, *kompang*, and *tabla* (Middle Eastern). When these instruments cross-cultural barriers, they do not necessarily bring the old concepts with them (Kartomi, 1981, p. 11). Through the transfer of discrete musical traits and syncretism, I show how P. Ramlee's music was localised to the culture of the local communities.

The musical reaction that occurs when one culture interacts with another varies according to the “power relations with the colonialist, the functions and value of music in society, and musical compatibilities” (Nettl 2005, p. 437). I suggest that when different musical cultures come into contact,

they simulate in different ways, each unique with its own political, social, and environmental surroundings. It is the exposure to these varied surroundings that shapes their unique music. Also, since most of P. Ramlee's music was composed as film themes, an examination of his music through the lens of film would justify the aesthetics of his musical arrangements. Therefore, while suggesting that P. Ramlee's music exemplifies local identity, I describe the various power structures that fueled his musical style and aesthetics such as urban entertainment, P. Ramlee's *habitus* or background and film directors.

Urban entertainment during the mid-twentieth century

When the British governed Malaya (1874-1957), they developed an administration system that provided political stability to the feuding civil wars in the Malay states. In 1957 Malaya was given independence from the British and consequently became Malaysia. The late nineteenth and early twentieth century was a period of economic, social, and political expansion in the Malay Peninsula. The strategic geographical position of the Straits Settlement—Penang and Melaka attracted people from all corners of the world to trade there. Labour demand from the tin mines, rubber estates, and the construction of railways attracted the Chinese, Indian and Indonesian immigrants (Tan, 1997, p. 8). Amongst them were Chinese sub-ethnic groups such as the Cantonese, Hokkien, Hakka, Teo Chews, Hainanese from China; and South Indians groups, namely the Gujaratis, Bengalis, Parsis, Tamils, Malbaris and other North Indian groups from India. In addition, the presence of the Europeans, Arabs, Armenians, Jews, Burmese, Thais, Bugis, Ambonese, Javanese, Rawanese, Minangkabaus, Sikhs, Ceylonese, Japanese and Filipinos added to the cultural diversity of the Peninsula (Su Nin, 1993, p. 14). The convergence of these communities resulted in the creation of a pluralistic society—its interaction and communication constructing the local heritage of music, culture and arts in Malaysia today. P. Ramlee's music portrayed the eclectic nature of musical performances in urban areas during the mid-twentieth century. His music fused excerpts of melodies, and rhythms from the cultural potpourri of its time.

The British brought music, entertainment, sports and games from their mother country, such as cricket, rugby, soccer, hockey, badminton, billiards, and card games (Tan, 1997, p. 19). According to Lockard (1991), British authority's state or constabulary bands, and Western musical instruments became popular in Malaya during the late nineteenth century. During the early twentieth century, Western-styled dance bands flourished as dance halls and cabarets burgeoned in cities and towns. Big bands performed in these commoditised arenas, tailoring their music to the taste and aesthetics of the British and local elite club members. P. Ramlee's music was influenced by the life style of the British—urban entertainment from big bands, dance cabarets, amusement parks and night clubs. Eclectic bands played Chinese or Malay music on Western instruments and men from the working class bought a ticket (ten cents each) to *joget*¹ (dance) with a dance hostess at amusement parks (Lockard, 1991, p. 18). Dances popular such as the foxtrot, waltz, and rumba were performed in dance halls (Tan, 1997, p. 14). There were also many forms of cultural activities inherent in the pluralistic society of Malaya during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Adapting to attract the locals at both sub-urban and urban entertainment outlets, an interesting amalgamation of cultural elements from both Western and local music were synergised. Early fusion of Western music with local music was observed in *ronggeng* or *joget*, *keroncong*, and *asli* songs performed at these venues. These bands played Latin-American flavoured rhythms like the cha-cha, rumba, samba, beguine, and twist. Popular dances such as the foxtrot, waltz, and swing were also performed in these halls (Lockard, 1991, p. 18). Urban entertainment and the social life style in the cities favoured by British elites soon influenced the local people. These types of music, classified under the term syncretic music flourished to greater heights as mass dissemination was made possible through the emergence of the film industry and radio channels during the mid-twentieth century

During the early Twentieth century, silent films were screened in tents by commercial companies while the gramophone and radio played popular Malay, Chinese, Indian and Western music whilst they were being reeled (Tan, 1997, pp. 9-10). Bangsawan (Malay opera) was a popular

¹ *Joget* is both a noun and an adverb. *Joget* by itself is a Malay dance style. To “*joget*” means to dance the *joget*.

form of urban commercial entertainment during the early twentieth century. The *Orkes Melayu*, an instrumental musical ensemble accompanied *Bangsawan* plays.² The music and songs in *Bangsawan* plays were heavily influenced by Middle Eastern and Indian musical styles (Lockard, 1991, p. 16). According to Tan (1997), *Bangsawan* was the first indigenous theatre to be modelled along Western lines, it engendered the development of the first Malay orchestra and the first popular music in the country (Tan, 1997, introduction).³ P. Ramlee's musical style developed from *Bangsawan*-styled music. *Bangsawan* performances declined after World War Two with the introduction of the film making and entertainment industry in Malaya. The immediate post-war period saw the expansion of the film industry whose popularity swept the country. Throngs of people lined up at the cinemas to buy tickets to watch his films. Commercial companies screened silent films in tents. The gramophone and radio played popular Malay, Chinese, Indian and Western music whilst they were being reeled (Tan, 1997, pp. 9-10). The mass media played a prominent role in boosting P. Ramlee's image and celebrity status. Besides the mode of entertainment inherent in the peninsular, P. Ramlee's music was also nurtured by the multi-cultural environment he grew up in. The next section provides a summary of his childhood.

Nurtured in a multi-cultural environment

P. Ramlee is looked upon as the father of Malay film and also the man who injected new life to Malay music (Chopyak, 1985, p. 70). He was a genius with various abilities; an actor, singer, director, songwriter, scriptwriter, film producer composer and arranger. His father was from Aceh, Indonesia, and mother from Butterworth, Penang.⁴ Born in Penang, P. Ramlee went to school in Penang until Standard Seven—*Sekolah Melayu Kampung Jawa*, *St Francis Light School*, and *Penang Free School* (Ahmad Sarji, 2002a, p. 5). P. Ramlee developed an enthusiasm for music at an early age. He played the violin, guitar, piano, ukulele, saxophone, trumpet, accordion, and xylophone, and was involved in the school band⁵ (Ahmad Sarji, 1999, p. 12). Frequent travels to perform with his big band ensemble exposed him to a variety of musical styles from different musicians and bands and musicians in Malaya during the 1940s to '60s (Ahmad Sarji, 1999, p. 6).

During his lifetime, P. Ramlee composed around 250 songs. The lyrics of these songs were shaped by film themes, which featured romantic or tragic love, family affairs, and folk tales from multi-cultural origins. P. Ramlee explored the rhythm and melodies ranging from local and foreign cultures. He incorporated Western and Latin American dance rhythms such as the samba, rumba, cha cha cha, beguine, rock and roll, mambo, twist, waltz, bolero, quickstep, conga, paso doble and slow foxtrot into his music (Ahmad Sarji, 2002a, p. 6). The nationalistic sentiments of the mid-twentieth century encouraged his utilisation of Malay *asli* rhythmic pattern namely, *joget*, *asli*, *zapin*, *inang* into his music. Besides infusing foreign and local rhythms, P. Ramlee also adapted the melodic modes of the Middle East and Hindustan into his music. He incorporated Chinese pentatonic scales and fragments of familiar/popular Western tunes into some of his compositions. However, one major

² The Chinese performed the Lion Dance during Chinese New Year, Chinese Opera and *Po Te Hi* (Glove puppet theatre) and the Hungry Ghost Festival whilst the Indians performed ceremonial music in the Temples, watched semi-operatic commercial Parsi theatres (Tan Sooi Beng, 1997, p. 14) or played Carnatic and Hindustani Music. The Malays participated in *keroncong*, *boria*, *joget*, *asli* ensembles, *zapin*, *kuda kepang*.

³ Popular Music began with *Bangsawan* in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century which portrayed influences from Indian, Middle East, Chinese, Indonesian and Western cultures. This style of music was adapted and innovated in the '40s and '50s by popular singers, namely, P. Ramlee, Nona Asiah, Normadiah, Saloma, Aziz Jaafar and Kassim Masdor. Their music utilised; Latin American flavoured dance music, Hawaiian music, Indian film music and Western popular music (Lockard, 1991, p. 19). A new trend of music appeared in the sixties with the adaptation of the rock and roll music of the Beatles, which caused a stir in the Western world, to what is known as the Pop Yeh Yeh style in Malaysia.

⁴ His father, Teuku Nyak Puteh was a descendent of the aristocratic family of Oleebang in East Aceh and his mother, Che Mah binte Hussein came from Kubang Buaya, Butterworth. (Ahmad Sarji 2000a, pp. 1-3).

⁵ He learnt to play the violin and guitar under the tutelage of Kamaruddin bin Idris, a famous music teacher in Penang. At the age of thirteen, P. Ramlee played his ukulele while singing 'Donkey Serenade', 'It's in the Air' and 'Nona-Nona Zaman Sekarang' (Ahmad Sarji 1999, p. 263).

P. Ramlee's film music and songs

From the years 1948-1955, Indian directors directed the films P. Ramlee acted in. P. Ramlee only began directing his own films from the years 1955 to 1973. Malaysia's pioneer years in the film-making industry were led by Indian directors that came directly from India. B.S. Rajhans directed the first Malay film production, *Laila Majnun* (1933), a Middle Eastern love story with Islamic overtones (Brunei, 2005, p. 132). Early P. Ramlee films directed by Indian directors were 'Tak Guna' in *Pembalasan* (1950), 'Kau Turun dari Kayangan' from *Patah Hati* (1952), 'Dunia Hanya Pinjaman' and 'Kejamnya Manusia' in the film *Miskin* (1952) (pers. comm., Ahmad Sarji, 6 June 2003). Other songs included 'Temukanlah' in *Gerimis* (1968) were performed in an average Hindustani tempo (Ahmad Sarji & Johari Salleh, 1993, p.135; 1999, p. 87). P. Ramlee's early films were directed by Indian directors and had a distinct Indian flavour.⁶ He borrowed rhythms and beats from Indian songs (Sankar, 2005, p. 89-92). Sankar (2005) also stated that the music, acting, costumes and storyline in the film *Kanchan Tirana* (1962) and *Hang Tuah* were influenced by films in India.

P. Ramlee was the man who moved Malay films away from the strict emulation of Indian models, developing a more unique Malayan content and style (Lockard, 1995, p. 20). The first film P. Ramlee directed was *Penarik Becha* (Trishaw Puller) in 1955. In this film, he was able to assert his own ideas and creativity on screen. *Penarik Becha* featured the life and difficulties of a common man living in a changing society. It showed the Malays negotiating between the conflicting ideals of tradition and modernity (Barnard, 2004, p. 84). P. Ramlee went on to direct films *Anakku Sazali* (1956), including *Bujang Lapuk* (1957), *Sergeant Hassan* (1958) and *Ibu Mertuaku* (1962). These films also exemplified the conflict between tradition and modernity. This changing taste was also reflected in P. Ramlee's films which slowly moved from stories of the Malay kingdoms and legendary heroes to portray realistic and social issues of the society of its time.⁷

The themes in P. Ramlee's films played a major role in determining the types of songs he would write to accompany the various scenes in his films. He composed music and songs to suit the theme, dramatic actions, melodrama and scenes in the films he acted in. The themes in his films ranged from stories about *kampung* (village) to urban life, Arabian, Indian, Hindustan or Malay legends, comedies, and family feuds. In his early acting days, P. Ramlee felt that his passion for composing was often confined to the content of his films as he was directed to compose sad, happy, calm songs with Malay or Hindustani rhythms. According to Ahmad Sarji (1999), P. Ramlee would have much desired to rearrange Malay *asli* songs and his *asli* compositions to *keroncong* styled music. (p. 269). When he began to direct his own movies, P. Ramlee incorporated rhythms such as *asli*, *joget*, *inang*, *zapin* and Arabic modes into the songs in his films (see Table 1).⁸

⁶ The first few films P. Ramlee acted in were *Chinta* (1948), *Noor Asmara* (1949), *Nasib* (1949), *Nilam* (1949), *Rachun Dunia* (1950) and *Aloha* (1950). These films were directed by B.S. Rajhan. L. Krishnan was the man who chose P. Ramlee to take the leading role in the film *Bakti* (1950). L. Krishnan also directed the film *Takdir Ilahi*, *Penghidupan* and *Antara Senyum dan Manis*. B.N Rao directed many of the films P. Ramlee acted in, such as *Putus Harapan* (1953), *Hujan Panas* (1953), *Siapa Salah* (1953), *Perjodohan* (1954), *Merana* (1954), *Abu Hassan Pencuri* (1955). Other films includes *Miskin* (1952) and *Patah Hati* (1952) by K.M. Basker. Phani Majumdar directed the movie *Hang Tuah* (1955), which won the "Golden Harvest" prize in the Hongkong Film Festival in 1956 (Ahmad Sarji, 1999) and *Anakku Sazali* (1956) which won the Asian Film Festival's Best Actor award in Tokyo.

⁷ The themes in film industry in the early 1950's paralleled the changing preference for realistic and historical plays in the theatre industry. Plays, known as the "sandiwara" plays depicted the glories of the Malay kingdom which coincided with the spirit of nationalism among the Malays nearing the period of independence from the British achieved in 1957 (Tan, 1997, p. 168).

⁸ *Asli* rhythm was found in 'Rintihan Dijiwaku' (*Banang Batu Belah Batu*, 1959), 'Seri Bunian' (*Sumpah Orang Minyak*, 1958), 'Senandung Kasih' (*Seniman Bujang Lapuk*, 1961). Inang rhythm was found in 'Inang Baru' (*Penarik Becha*, 1955) whilst joget rhythm were used in 'Joget Malaysia' (*Ragam P. Ramlee*, 1961), 'Joget Tari

In the 1960's, the popularity of rock and roll swept across Malaysia due to the fascination with the Beatles in the West. The youth were mesmerised by this new style music and many idolised the Beatles. As a reaction to this trend, P. Ramlee formed a group called Panca Sitara with the intention of reviving Malay music. This group formed a chorus of voices consisting of famous singers including Aziz Jaafar, Normadiah, Ahmad C, Kasim Masdor, and P. Ramlee. Songs arranged similar to the style of *The Platters*, in slow rock fashion were sung by this group. These songs included 'Aku Bermimpi', 'Senyum, Aku', 'Menangis' and 'Tidurlah Wahai Pemaissuri.' Besides these songs, some Malay *asli* songs, including 'Seri Mersing', 'Tudung Saji' and 'Makan Sireh' were also arranged and sung in that manner. Music instruments that accompanied the singers were the piano, tenor saxophone, double bass and drums (Ahmad Sarji, 1999, pp. 224-5). The film and music industry were largely dependent on public tastes and appeal. P. Ramlee had to adapt and innovate his music to suit the taste of the public in general. He tried with some limited success to utilise Western rock and pop ideas into his music. He was one of the first Malay musicians to use rock and roll beats (Lockard, 1991, p. 24).

In this article, I have selected a few songs performed in the context of P. Ramlee's films to exemplify the transfer of discrete musical traits and syncretism. These selection includes the utilisation of the *zapin* rhythm in 'Semerah Padi' in the film *Semerah Padi* and *joget* rhythm from 'Joget Malaysia' (*Ragam P. Ramlee*, 1961). Western dance rhythms were frequently used as the rhythmic basis of songs—Beguine rhythm in 'Getaran Jiwa' (*Antara Dua Darjat*, 1960), March in 'Bujang Berempat' (*Do Re Mi*, 1966) and Waltz in 'Tolong Kami' (*Tiga Abdul*, 1964). Chinese scales were used in 'Sam Pek Eng Tai' (*Kanchan Tirana*, 1969) and 'Apek dan Marjina' (*Ali Baba Bujang Lapuk*, 1961), while Middle Eastern modes in 'Ya Habibi Ali Baba' (*Ali Baba Bujang Lapuk*, 1961), 'Di Mana Kan Ku Cari Ganti' (*Ibu Mertuaku*, 1961) and 'Bunga Melur.' P. Ramlee also incorporated fragments of popular Western tunes like 'Swanee River' into 'Do Re Mi' (*Do Re Mi*, 1966) and 'Banana Boat Song' into 'Mencece Bujang Lapuk' (*Pendekar Bujang Lapuk*, 1959).

Foreign rhythms in P. Ramlee's music

Zapin in 'Semerah Padi'

Manifesting the spirit of the traditional Malay communities in the villages, the film *Semerah Padi* begins with the portrayal of a group of Malay farmers working together to harvest paddy (Ahmad Sarji, 2002a, p. 228). *Semerah Padi* tells the story of contradictions that arrive through the implementation of customarily arranged marriages between royal families. In this film, Dara, the daughter of the *penghulu* (chief) of the Semerah Padi village, who is in love with Aduka, is forced to marry Taruna. One day, while Taruna is away fighting pirates, Dara and Aduka commit adultery and are subjected to the customary penalty of death by Islamic law.

The *zapin* rhythmic pattern is shown in Example 1. In the song 'Semerah Padi' the transfer of discrete musical traits is observed through the use of *zapin*⁹ rhythm played by the trumpet and accordion in bars 7 and 8 (See Example 2).¹⁰ *Zapin* is also a folk dance of Arabic origin and was introduced to Malaysia by the Arabs residing in Johor before the fourteenth century (Tan and Matusky, 1997, p. 325). In this song, the *zapin* rhythm had come to represent the Malay identity. This rhythm is utilised to manifest the energy, spirit and ethos of the Malay community who dominated the agricultural sector during the pre-Independent period. The film begins with the vibrant and energetic

Lenggang' (*Ragam P. Ramlee*, 1961), 'Joget Pura Chendana' (*Musang Berjanggut*, 1959). *Zapin* rhythm was incorporated into songs like 'Gambus Jodoh' (*Madu Tiga*, 1964), 'Zapin Budaya' (*Dajal Suchi*, 1974), and 'Semerah Padi' (*Semerah Padi*, 1956). *Keroncong* style pieces were heard in 'Alunan Biola' (*Antara dua Darjat*, 1960) (See Table 1).

⁹ *Zapin* is a fast and lively dance characterised by a specific and improvised four beat rhythmic pattern. The "original" musical instruments that accompanied *Zapin* were the *gambus*, violin, harmonium, accordion, *dok* and *marwas*. In Malaysia today (2011), *Zapin* is performed for entertainment and inauguration of events. Many of P. Ramlee's films featured songs utilising *zapin* rhythm (see Table 1).

¹⁰ Full score found in Chan, C.S.C. (2003), appendix.

zapin rhythm played on the frame drums. It accompanies a homophonic musical arrangement based on Western diatonic scales. The musical style of alternation between a solo singer and chorus arranged in typical in Western musical structures is also utilised. The singer uses a smooth crooning voice whilst the female chorus replies in high-pitched nasal voice.



Example 1: A typical *Zapin* rhythm performed on a traditional frame drum¹¹

Percussion 7 8 9

Bass

Trumpet

Violin

Melody

Accordion

Example 2: ‘Semerah Padi’ (transcribed by Haidir bin Mohd Tahir, 2003)¹²

Joget rhythm in ‘Joget Malaysia’

The *joget* rhythm is distinguished by its constant use of triplets in duple time or three-against-two rhythm patterns. The *joget* dance was greatly influenced by Malaysian Portuguese. The Melaka *joget* is a lively Malay dance with four beats to each bar. The gong usually plays on every second beat (Tan & Matusky 1997, p. 325). P. Ramlee incorporated many *joget* rhythms into his songs, such as ‘Saya Suka Berkawan’ and ‘Gelora Chinta’ from the film *Putus Harapan* (1953); ‘Joget Tari Lenggang’ from *Hang Tuah* (1956); ‘Joget Si Pinang Muda’ from *Anakku Sazali* (1956); ‘Joget Pura Chendana’ from *Musang Berjanggut* (1959); ‘Oh Manis Ku’ from *Takdir Ilhahi* (1950), and ‘Joget Istana’ from *Tunggal* (1961) (See Table 1). ‘Serampang Laut’ is an example of a *joget* song utilising a constant *joget* rhythm in its melodic line. An example of how *joget* is combined with Western musical instruments and tonality is ‘Joget Malaysia’ from *Ragam P. Ramlee* (1961). The strings and *gendang* (drum) manifests the *joget* rhythm by performing triplets in duple rhythm or a three-against-two rhythm.

¹¹ The music transcription uses a 2-line score, each representing the mnemonic sounds of ‘tak’(T) and ‘dung’(D) on the kompong.

¹² Full musical transcription (Chan, C.S.C. 2003, appendix).

Joget

Example 3: *Joget* rhythm in ‘Serampang Laut’ (adapted from Tan & Matusky, 1997, p. 333)

Example 4: ‘Joget Malaysia’ (transcribed by Mohd Nizam bin Nasrifan, 2003)¹³

Beguine in *Antara Dua Darjat*

In the film *Antara Dua Darjat* (1960), Tengku Zaleha, the daughter of a rich aristocrat, falls in love with Tengku Kassim, a poor musician. Due to their difference in class status, they are not allowed to marry. Similar to ‘Semerah Padi,’ this film criticises the feudal system that classifies society into hierarchical groups.

This film features one of P. Ramlee’s most famous songs, ‘Getaran Jiwa.’ P. Ramlee uses the beguine rhythm to accompany this song, which is arranged in a Western homophonic style based on the diatonic scale. Beguine is the national dance from Martinique in the West Indies, which is sung in slow polka with a dotted rhythm (Gammond, 1991, p. 49). In Example 5, the Beguine is created from the rhythm created by the combination of various Western instruments. A syncopated rhythm is played by the claves and bass drum. The bongo and the maracas interlock with the syncopated rhythm by providing the downbeat patterns.

¹³ Full musical transcription (Chan, C.S.C. 2003, appendix).

‘Getaran Jiwa’ is sung in the Malay language. In this song, the treble clef in the piano part emphasises the syncopated offbeat feel of the Beguine by chordal emphasis on the offbeats. The percussion part also provides an offbeat accent on the fourth quaver of the bar. The combination of non-Western rhythms and the Malay language embodies the eclectic nature of the local communities in Malaysia.

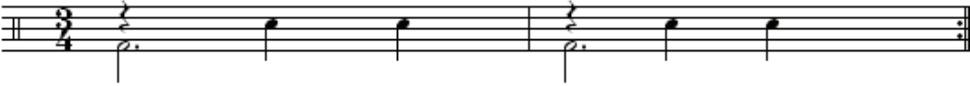
Example 5: The beguine rhythm (transcribed by author, 2011)

Example 6: Musical excerpt from ‘Getaran Jiwa’¹⁴

¹⁴ Full musical transcription (Chan, C.S.C. 2003, appendix).

Waltz in ‘Tolong Kami’

The Waltz is a dance in triple time. It became popular in Vienna in the early nineteenth century. One of the features in the Viennese Waltz is a slight anticipation of the second beat in the bar, which adds lilt, lift, and life to it (Gammond, 1991, p. 593).



Source: Feldstein, Sandy (1978).

Example 7: The Waltz rhythm (adapted from Feldstein, 1978)

The Waltz is the underlying rhythm accompaniment to the song ‘Tolong Kami’ in the film *Tiga Abdul* (1964). In ‘Tolong Kami’ (See Example 8), a variation of the Waltz rhythm pattern is employed in the drum section. The first beat of this triple meter is give emphasis by the lower timbre on the drum. Here, the Waltz accompanies a homophonic musical arrangement based on Western diatonic scales. The transfer of discrete musical traits and syncretism is observed in the combination of a Western rhythm, Western musical instruments, Malay song text, and a minor feel.

 A full musical score for the song 'Tolong Kami' in 3/4 time, one sharp key signature. The score includes:

- Melody: Treble clef, mostly rests.
- Chorus: Treble clef, mostly rests.
- Strings: Treble clef, playing a melodic line with eighth and quarter notes.
- Accordian: Treble clef, playing chords.
- Vibraphone: Treble clef, playing a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes.
- Bass: Bass clef, playing a simple bass line.
- Drum: Snare drum, playing a waltz rhythm with a strong first beat.
- High Hat: Cymbal, playing a steady eighth-note pattern.

Example 8: ‘Tolong Kami’ (transcribed by Mohd Nizam bin Nasrifan, 2003¹⁵).

¹⁵ Full musical transcription (Chan, C.S.C. 2003, appendix).

Foreign Scales and Modes

Through musical analysis, I propound that P. Ramlee utilised excerpts from scales and melodies from three different cultures namely Chinese, Arabian and Indian. P. Ramlee's utilised melodic modes related to these cultures in some of his films which were based on legendary stories from Malay, Arabian, Chinese, Indian, and Western epics or folk tales. P. Ramlee incorporated the scales and modes to create culture-related character stereotypes, and to evoke the ambience and flavour of these various cultures. Excerpts of Western popular tunes were also adapted into some of his songs.

Chinese pentatonic scale in 'Sam Pek Eng Tai'

P. Ramlee was said to have been captivated with Chinese Opera. Growing up in a multi cultural potpourri such as Penang, where Chinese heritage, tradition and art was flourished, P. Ramlee was often exposed to all types of Chinese music (Ahmad Sarji 1999) Traces of a typical Chinese pentatonic scales and "Chinese"¹⁶ sounds are observed in two songs; 'Sam Pek Eng Tai' from the film *Kanchan Tirana* (1969); 'Apek dan Marjina' from *Ali Baba Bujang Lapuk* (1961).

In the film *Kanchan Tirana*, the song 'Sam Pek Eng Tai' utilised Chinese pentatonic scales in its melodic line. *Kanchan Tirana* was produced in 1969 under Merdeka Film Studio, Kuala Lumpur. Sam Pek Eng Tai is the Chinese version of tragic romance *Romeo and Juliet* and *Laila Majnun*. Fragments of melodies from 'Sam Pek Eng Tai' consists of an intervallic structure which resembles the typical Chinese pentatonic scale represented by the pitches C, D, E, G, A (see Example 9). The interval between C to D and D to E are a tone apart, whereas the interval between E and G is a minor third, followed by another interval of a third from G to A.



Example 9: Chinese Pentatonic Scale

The image shows two staves of musical notation for the song 'Sam Pek Eng Tai'. The first staff starts with a treble clef, a key signature of one flat (Bb), and a 4/4 time signature. The notes are: Bb, C, D, E, G, A. The lyrics are: I - ni lah se - bu - ah se - ri - ta Ki - sah di ne - gri Ti - jong Hwa Me - re - ka ber - se - ko - lah ting - gi Ber - sa - ha - bat se - ja - ti. The second staff continues the melody with notes: Bb, C, D, E, G, A. The lyrics are: Du - a ka - sih yang pu - tus a - sa Sam Pek dan Eng Tai ke - ce - wa Eng Tai me - nya - mar - la - ki - la - ki Ma - lang - nya Sam Pek tak me - nger - ti. Chord symbols are placed above the notes: Bb, D-, Eb, Eb, G-, C.7 F7, Bb, D-, Eb, E DIM C.7/F(Bass) F7, Bb.

Example 10: 'Sam Pek Eng Tai' (Ahmad Sarji & Johari Salleh, 1995)

¹⁶ I used the term "Chinese" because some of these songs do not fully incorporated a pentatonic scale. However, it emphasises the minor third interval to create the "Chinese" flavor. I prefer not to stereotype Chinese music to merely pentatonic scales.

Quran cantillations in the song ‘Ya Habibi Ali Baba’

‘Ya Habibi Ali Baba’ is a song sung by the forty thieves in the film *Ali Baba Bujang Lapuk*. The melodic style in ‘Ya Habibi Ali Baba’ (See Example 14) uses repeated phrases and melodic sequences characterised by stepwise movements and involving small upward leaps of a fourth. This type of melodic style resembles a chant-like conjunct rhythmic recitation, a musical style inherent in Quran antillations in Islam.



Example 14: ‘Ya Habibi Ali Baba’ (Ahmad Sarji & Johari Salleh, 1996)

Western Popular Tunes

Fragments of familiar Western tunes can sometimes be heard in P. Ramlee’s songs. The appearance of these fragments is due to the influence of the Western songs in Malaya. Examples of these fragments are traced in the song ‘Do Re Mi’ and ‘Mencece Bujang Lapuk’.

‘Swanee River’ in the song ‘Do Re Mi’

‘Swanee River’ or ‘Suwanee River’ flows down south from the Okeefenokee Swamp in Georgia to the Gulf of Mexico in Florida (official song of Florid.) (Example 15). In the chorus of the song ‘Do Re Mi’ (see Example 16), fragments from the original song titled ‘Swanee River’ or ‘Old Folks at Home’ can be heard. Stephen Foster, one of America’s best musical storytellers wrote this song in 1851. The melody of ‘Old Folks at Home/ Swanee River’ is used in bars 6 to 9 of the song ‘Do Re Mi, Part 2’.

Moderato

STEPHEN C. FOSTER (1826-1864)
Arranged by Maxwell Eckstein

'Way down u pon de Swa- nee rib-ber, Far, far a - way,

Dere's wha myheart is turn- ing eb-ber, Dere's wha de old folks stay.

Example 15: ‘Old Folks at Home’ or ‘Swanee River’

1 $B^{\flat 7}$ E^{\flat} A^{\flat} $Adim$ E^{\flat}
Ba - ik ja - di ten - te - ra la - ut Je - rung a - ku ta - kut

6 E^{\flat} $E^{\flat 7}/D^{\flat}$ A^{\flat}/C $Adim$ E^{\flat}/B^{\flat} $B^{\flat 7}$ E^{\flat}
Ba - ik ja - di ten - tra u - da - ra Allah Ting gi sang at a - ku tak hen - dak

Example 16: ‘Do Re Mi, Part 2’ (Ahmad Sarji & Johari Salleh, 1995).

‘Day-O’ in the song ‘Mencece Bujang Lapuk’

Fragments of ‘Day-O’ (also known as the Banana Boat Song), Harry Belafonte’s classic melody are used in the introduction to the song ‘Mencece Bujang Lapuk’ from the film *Seniman Bujang Lapuk* (1961) (see Example 17, bars 1-5). This song was a 1956 chart hit. This famous classic melody resurfaces again in the movie, *Beetle Juice*, a story about a mischievous ghost played by Michael Keaton.¹⁷

1 F A- B $^{\flat}$ G- 7 C 7 F
Oh Men-ce - ce men - ce - ce

Example 17: ‘Mencece Bujang Lapuk’ (Ahmad Sarji & Johari Salleh, 1995).

Conclusion

In this article, I show how P. Ramlee’s music is symbolic of the local cultural identity of the twentieth century. It represented an era where social-cultural interaction merged to form the features of music that rose to great heights due to the dissemination of the mass media. Whilst popular music that was also eclectic in nature began with *Bangsawan* music and songs, P. Ramlee refined this genre of music and took it to wider audience through film technology. Although ethnic groups of ethnicities were inherent in Malaya during the mid-twentieth century, it was Western, Arabic, Indian and Chinese music that had impact on P. Ramlee’s music. This reaffirms Nettl’s (1983) comment that hybrid styles occur when the sources are compatible and share commonalities (Nettl, 1983, p. 440). This musical was made possible by the power structures that merged to form this music—urban entertainment, Indian and Malay film directors, and the social-political climate of the era.

P. Ramlee’s music was important in Malaya because it signified an era where British powers were the authority, and other ethnic immigrant groups focused on daily living. His music was a tipping point to where the social political situation would change to an ethnic-driven desire for authority in governance, the creation of a nation-state, a one “imagined” (Anderson 1983) community and the impetus for recognition as a developed country. These changing agendas would reshuffle the

¹⁷ From the website [http://: septterror.tripod.com/dayo.html](http://septterror.tripod.com/dayo.html), Retrieved on the 16 July 2003.

synergy and ethos a less-politically ethnicised social structures before Independence in 1957. P. Ramlee's music, whilst aesthetically beautiful and evergreen also conjured nostalgic sentiments of the state of being of a less politically driven and more subservient to ethnically divided groups governed under the British umbrella. This idealised imaginations of a harmonious community was often depicted in the late Yasmin Ahmad's films¹⁸ (2003-2009) and Petronas advertisements. The state of being was embodied in a musical style that synthesised cultural elements from the potpourri of cultures in interaction then, thus exuding the true local cultural identity of its time. His music appealed to of the multi-cultural communities because it embodied qualities that reflected a harmonious state of living much desired, imagined and perhaps lived during his time.

Table 1: The variety of rhythms used in P. Ramlee's Music

No	Rhythm	Songs	Film
1.	<i>Asli</i> <i>Slow Asli</i>	Aduhai Sayang Permata Bonda Rintihan Dijiwaku Senyap dan Sunyi	Hujan Panas (1953) Banang Batu Belah Batu (1959) Siapa Salah (1953)
2.	Beguine <i>Slow Beguine</i>	Merak Kayangan Derita Hujan Di Tengah Hari Kembara Getaran Jiwa Entah Di Mana Semenjak Mata Bertentang Putus Sudah Kasih Sayang	Hujan Panas (1953) Hujan Panas (1953) Perjodohan (1953) Kanchan Tirana (1969) Antara Dua Darjat (1960) Keluarga 69 (1966) Keluarga 69 (1966) Putus Sudah Kasih Sayang (1971)
3.	Bolero	Juwita	Juwita (1951)
4.	Bossa Nova	Siapa Kanda Hanya Angan-angan	- -
5.	Cha-cha-cha	Tiru Macam Saya Mengapakah Laguku	Hujan Panas (1953) -
6.	Conga	Impian Kalbu	Miskin (1952)
7.	Hindustani	Tak Guna Dunia Hanya Pinjaman Kejamnya Manusia Temukanlah	Pembalasan (1950) Miskin (1952) Miskin (1952) Gerimis (1968)
8.	<i>Inang Inang Rancak</i>	<i>Inang</i> Baru Lenggang Kangkong Baru	Penarik Becha (1955) -
9.	<i>Joget</i>	Oh Manis Ku Saya suka berkawan Joget Pahang Joget Si Pinang Muda Joget Pura Chendana Joget Tari Lenggang Mengapa Abang Merajuk Joget Istana Joget Malaysia	Putus Harapan (1953) Hang Tuah (1956) Anak-ku Sazali (1956) Musang Berjanggut (1959) Hang Tuah (1956) Takhir Ilahi (1950) Tunggal (1961) Ragam P. Ramlee (1961)
10.	<i>Keroncong</i>	Alunan Biola Keroncong Kuala Lumpur Uda dan Dara Bumiku Ini	Antara Dua Darjat (1960) Anak Bapak (1968) - -

¹⁸ These films include *Sepet* (2004), *Mukhsin* (2007) *Muallaf* (2008), and *Talentine* (2009).

11.	Latin	Harapan Bonda	-
12.	Mambo	Kwek Mambo	Belantara (1957)
13.	March Rancak	Bujang Merempat Do Re Mi Tiga Sahabat	Do Re Mi (1966) Do Re Mi (1966) Laksamana Do Re Mi (1972)
14.	Passo Doble	Sekuntum Mawar	Juwita (1951)
15.	Quick Step	Dengar Ini Cerita	-
16.	Rumba Slow Rumba	Bila Larut Malam Hujan Di Tengah Hari Hamidah	Labu Labi (1962) Perjodohan (1953) Ibu (1953)
17.	Samba Samba Sederhana	Bubor Sagu Berdendang Ria Nasi Goreng Ingin Tahu Mari Dengar Ini Cerita Kumbang dengan bunga Kachang Goreng	Bapa Saya (1951) Anjoran Nasib (1952) Hujan Chemburu (1952) Hujan Panas (1953) Hujan Panas (1953) Siapa Salah (1953) Rayuan Sukma (1951)
18.	Slow Fox	Ibu	Ibu (1953)
19.	Swing Swing Cepat	Pok-Pok Bujang Lapuk Mutiarra Permai	Pendekar Bujang Lapuk (1959) Pulau Mutiara (1951)
20.	Slow Rock	Bila	-
21.	Twist	Twist Malaysia Gelora Bunyi Gitar Ai Ai Twist	- Seniman Bujang Lapuk (1961) Tiga Abdul (1964) Masam-masam Manis (1965)
22.	Waltz	Dimana 'Kan Ku Cari Ganti' Tolong Kami Dunia Hanya Pinjaman Tidurku di Rumput yang Basah	Ibu Mertuaku (1961) Tiga Abdul (1964) Miskin (1952) Siapa Salah (1953)
23.	<i>Zapin</i>	Semerah Padi Gambus Jodoh Selamat Pengantin Baru Zapin Malaysia Zapin Budaya Bunga Melur	Semerah Padi (1956) - Madu Tiga (1964) - Dajal Suchi (1974) -

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Biography

Clare Chan Suet Ching received her Ph.D. in Music in the field of Ethnomusicology from the University of Hawai'i at Manoa in 2010. Her PhD study was sponsored by a Fulbright Scholarship, the Asia-Pacific Graduate Fellowship in Ethnomusicology from University of Hawaii at Manoa, and the East-West Center Graduate Degree Fellowship. She was the first recipient of the Sumi Makey Scholars Award for Arts and Humanities in 2008. Her research interests include issues of identity, nationalism, tourism, globalisation, and modernisation in Chinese, *Orang Asli* (indigenous minorities) and Malay music in Malaysia. She has written on the 24 *Jie Ling Gu* (24 Chinese Festive Drums), P. Ramlee's music, and the impact of tourism and modernisation on the music of the indigenous Semelai and Mah Meri of Malaysia. Clare is now the Deputy Dean of Research and Postgraduate Studies in the Faculty of Music and Performing Arts of Sultan Idris Education University (UPSI) in Malaysia.