

COUNTERING MTV INFLUENCE IN INDONESIA AND MALAYSIA

By Kalinga Seneviratne



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**COUNTERING
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The **Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS)** was established as an autonomous organization in 1968. It is a regional centre dedicated to the study of socio-political, security and economic trends and developments in Southeast Asia and its wider geostrategic and economic environment. The Institute's research programmes are the Regional Economic Studies (RES, including ASEAN and APEC), Regional Strategic and Political Studies (RSPS), and Regional Social and Cultural Studies (RSCS).

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Preface

Two theoretical perspectives related to international communication (i.e., cultural imperialism and cultural identity) reflect the battle between the forces of globalization and local cultural identity taking place all over the world. In the last decade, Indonesia and Malaysia, two predominantly Islamic countries in Southeast Asia, have opened their doors to forces of cultural flows and globalization, especially to the intermediary global media. People in both societies are seeking to come to terms with new cultural identities embracing modern media technologies while at the same time wanting to preserve their liberal Islamic culture. This book sets out to investigate and discuss the multilayered “postmodern” cultural identities that are being negotiated, particularly as these new identities relate to adaptation of the use of new media technologies and media forms to the needs of local culture and religion.

The study did not try to look at how Western culture is rejected or resisted by Indonesian and Malaysian youth. Rather it looked at how certain aspects of the Music Television (MTV) formula — mainly the technical aspects of presentation and formatting — could be appropriated and refashioned so that the cultural output of the local product does not reflect a Western cultural expression but a Malaysian or Indonesian cultural expression rebranded to look contemporary/modern, without losing the local

cultural flavour. Thus, the study examines how aspects of MTV create new cultural identities rooted in the traditional culture but refashioned and reinterpreted for local relevance and consumption, so that youth would see it as an expression of their “modern” identity.

Choice of Topic

As a teenager growing up in Sri Lanka in the 1970s I was widely exposed to a genre of music called *baila*.¹ Drawing on Sri Lankan drumming, Portuguese folk music rhythms, and Sinhalese lyrics, this music was very popular, especially with the urban youth of the time. However, the lovers of Sinhalese traditional and classical music saw the *baila* as *thupai* (corrupted) music, as belonging neither to the Eastern nor to the Western musical traditions. Rather, it was seen as having a corrupting influence on the country's youth. As a result, those of middle- and upper-middle-class backgrounds were discouraged from developing a taste for this genre. It was considered much more desirable to develop a taste for the pop music of the West, the Beatles or rock and roll, for example, and the Jamaican reggae, which was popular with Western youth at the time.

While working in Singapore some thirty years later, that is, for a five-year period between 1997 and 2002 teaching mass communications to teenage students at a local polytechnic, I became interested in the type of music they were consuming as teenagers of this era. Although on the surface Singapore may seem a very westernized modern city, Singaporean youth seemed not to have been completely won over by Western pop culture, which is

widely in evidence in the island state today. While they had developed a taste for Western pop music, including R & B and hip hop, many of the Chinese youth were fans of the Cantopop² stars from Hong Kong. Young Indians were bhangra³ enthusiasts, bhangra being a lively form of song and dance that originated in the Punjab region of India. The Malays were listening to *dangdut*, a form of Indonesian pop music that has its roots in the folk music of Indonesia, particularly from Java and Riau provinces, but it has since been heavily influenced by Indian Bollywood film music and Arabic drum/dance rhythms.

Looking deeper into the issue of why these young people were eager consumers of their own pop music while at the same time not rejecting the Western music available to them, I began to find some interesting cultural and social forces at play. A major player in this was MTV, which, rather than imposing a Western musical culture on the local youth, was stimulating their interest in their own musical genres and modern dance music by using MTV's production formulas and promotional techniques.

During my frequent visits to Indonesia and Malaysia, I noted that on most of the local television channels, especially in Indonesia, *dangdut* shows were major attractions. In addition, in most Indonesian cities I visited, *dangdut* discotheques were very common and extremely popular. Because this particular form of music is very similar to the Sri Lankan *baila*, I developed an interest in ascertaining how *dangdut* has become so popular in these predominantly Islamic societies.

In 1995 I wrote a story for Inter Press Service (IPS) news agency, looking at *dangdut*'s potential to become the

MUSIC-MALAYSIA:**Dancing to the Lambada of the East**

By Kalinga Seneviratne

KUALA LUMPUR: Her tunes are heard everywhere, from the farthest kampong or villages to fast-encroaching towns to modern shopping malls in the rapidly growing Malaysian capital.

In the city streets, the music of a 22-year-old singer called Norazlina Amir Sharifudin blares out of mini-buses, giving commuters some respite from traffic jams.

Popularly known as "Amelina", Sharifudin is taking Malaysia by storm with her brand of the infectious Malay pop music known as "dangdut". In the process, she is transforming "dangdut" into what some say could be an international dance music craze.

Her latest album, "Dang Dang Dut", released by Warner Music Malaysia in October, has already sold more than 220,000 copies.

"Dangdut is a big thing here now," said Sharon Menezes, production coordinator of Warner Music Malaysia. "We have received comments from several respected entertainment journalists indicating that this music has all the capabilities of becoming the lambada of the East".

Dangdut puts a novel twist on Indian film music, and has a touch of American swingbeat, Sudanese melodic forms combined with Malay rhythm, says Kean Wong, a magazine editor who is writing a masteral thesis on world music.

Believing in the appeal of dangdut, Amelina's record firm has invested in the largest stable of dangdut artistes in Malaysia.

Warner Music Malaysia plans to market the music beyond Malaysia's shores. Amelina's latest album is already

in the market in neighbouring Singapore, and the company hopes to release it soon in Indonesia, the Philippines and Japan.

Dangdut has been popular in Indonesia for sometime, with singers like Rhoma Irama enjoying “absolutely massive popularity” there, adds Wong, editor of “Men’s Review”, a popular monthly for Malaysia’s urban middle class.

“In Malaysia, the time has certainly come [for dangdut] to take off,” Wong says, adding that Amelina may in fact also put the music on the world map.

Wong describes dangdut as a “genre of music that incorporates centuries-old polyrhythms and cross cultural styles, stretching several Asian latitudes”.

Dangdut songs have a strong Indian [Hindustani] film music influence. The video clip produced by Warner Music for Amelina’s latest hit looks like a reproduction of an Indian film music clip: the sequences, dance styles and colourful dresses could come from a production from Bombay’s “Bollywood”. The lyrics, of course, are in Malay.

Amir Muhammad, a columnist for the “New Strait Times” newspaper, agrees that dangdut has a strong Indian flavour. But he added that it is also very much Malay music, popular among the working classes here.

“Its origin is quite Hindustani, but the music has been adopted into Malay culture,” Muhammad said. “By analogy, it’s like the blues in the U.S. a few decades ago. It talks about what pop music doesn’t talk about.”

“Its a form of underground music ... the tone [of the lyrics] is pessimistic,” he said, adding that “dangdut [dances] could get rowdy. Crowds can get over-enthusiastic.”

“It is very much the dance music of South-east Asia,” says Wong, “because it draws so much from traditional rhythms, which themselves have derived from traditional popular dance music and has been updated with the use

of technology. Which is why it translates so well to urban audiences”.

Though dangdut has much more local flavour than Western pop music, it still has an image problem in Malaysia.

“Part of it is to do with a fair bit of ignorance by the urban middle-class as to what dangdut is,” Wong said. Due to its kampong origins, it is closely identified with the working class and is seen as unsophisticated music, reflecting “a kind of cultural snobbishness” by urban middle classes.

Still, Muhammad believes dangdut music is creeping into the urban middle classes “because the performers are getting younger and prettier”. It is also breaking into the mainstream as top promoters like Warner Music sign on dangdut singers.

“Those who buy it and listen to it need not necessarily go into the dance clubs,” he says. “But they may become fans”.

The music’s popularity among urban folk has led to a string of exclusively dangdut pubs sprouting here — though some deride them as nothing more than glorified brothels.

The dimly-lit night spots usually have live music on weekends and on some weeknights. What bothers dangdut fans, who want the music to have a clean image, is the type of clients these clubs appeal to.

Males enter the clubs for free, but their female companions are charged an entry fee. The reason? The clubs employ young female hostesses to keep male patrons company, for anything over 35 ringgit (15 U.S. dollars) an hour.

They dance, chat and drink with male clients until closing time, after which they are free to “provide any other services”.

As a record company executive put it: “The cosmopolitan city person is not prepared to admit that he or she likes

dangdut, though you'd find the very same people in dangdut bars. They can't resist the dangdut vibe, but would rather not talk about it, choosing to be associated with Western music instead!"

Amelina herself worries about dangdut's image. "I hope the imagery associated with dangdut does not degrade to the level of sleaze," she told "Men's Review" in a recent interview. It is the artists' responsibility "to see that the music maintains respectable connotations, not otherwise," she added.

But Wong is confident that dangdut will weather this image problem, being "very populist" music in Malaysia: "The interesting thing now for dangdut is really to see whether it will translate into the broader non-Malay Malaysian community."

"At this stage, so much pop culture in Malaysia is polarised depending on ethnic background. Thus by default, you have Western pop culture being sort of common language," he pointed out.

If dangdut replaces Western pop as the dance music of Malaysia's urban middle class, that could yet be the first step in making this music the "lambada of the East".

Source: IPS Arts and Culture Bulletin, January 1997

"Lambada of the East" (see boxed story). I researched the rising popularity of the genre in Malaysia after coming across CDs of this form of music in record bars in Kuala Lumpur and being attracted to its rhythms. During the writing of the story I interviewed a number of music critics and record company people as well as several youthful enthusiasts.

In the following years I listened to a lot of *dangdut* music on radio, via CD purchases, and in discotheques in Indonesia and Singapore. I also watched *dangdut* shows on Malaysian and Indonesian television, which could be picked up in Singapore.

In 1998 I came across another phenomenon in Malay music, the rise of Raihan, a Malaysian music group which attained pop-star status singing Islamic *nasyid* religious poetry accompanied by the traditional hand-held Malay drum. My introduction to Raihan was at the Hari Raya (end of the Ramadan fast) concert held at the Singapore Indoor Stadium in 1998, when a capacity crowd (of about 5,000), which mainly included families, attended a live performance by Raihan. Then I saw their song clips broadcast on MTV. A few months later I interviewed the group in Kuala Lumpur and subsequently wrote a freelance feature story for IPS news agency under the heading “Islam Goes Pop” (see boxed story).

These observations encouraged me to undertake this study and to explore the cultural and social factors contributing to the rising popularity of these genres of music in the region. This was also a time when MTV began expanding in the region. The musical tastes of some youth, especially in Singapore, seem to be influenced by its products, which were mainly “Western” musical genres. Being someone who was greatly influenced by the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO)⁴ debates of the 1970s and 1980s, and the accompanying arguments surrounding the impact of cultural imperialism, I felt that the popularity of *nasyid* and *dangdut* music in the region represented a challenge to that theory.

Islam Goes Pop

By Kalinga Seneviratne

KUALA LUMPUR: Move over those Backstreet Boys and Hanson. A new Islamic musical revolution is sweeping Malaysia and is threatening to spread to the rest of Asia. It's led by a clean-cut singing group of young men called "Raihan", which in Arabic means "sweet scent to heaven."

The five members of Raihan are singing their way into the hearts of fans through traditional Islamic religious hymns called "nasyids". Raihan gives these traditional tunes a modern touch, courtesy of percussion instruments. The result? Music that is at once hip and uplifting.

"When people hear nasyids, they associate it with Arabic religious musical culture," Raihan frontman Zarie Ahmad told IPS. "But we didn't like it to be traditional Arab tunes. It must be contemporary."

"Sometimes we bring ballad songs, sentimental songs, but the music is very poetic," he added. "We put the love of God, advice of the good deeds. That's what is called 'contemporary nasyids'."

Whatever it is, people are listening and snapping up Raihan's works. The group's debut album, "Puji-Pujian", was released only last year, but already has broke records in Malaysia with 650,000 copies sold so far. The previous record holder sold 350,000 copies.

"Puji-Pujian" has outsold not only the songs of other Malaysian pop stars but also Western musical stars. The group's second album, released three months ago, has sold 150,000 copies and is still going strong. Raihan's music videos also get regular play on MTV Asia and the group's

recording company, Warner Music Malaysia, is betting it will soon become a byword in Asia as it is now in Malaysia.

Chandra Muzaffar, director of the Institute for Islamic Understanding and president of the International Movement for a Just World, says Raihan's success in this country is due in no small measure to a desire by many middle-class Malaysians to identify with what they see as another expression of Islam.

"It is a manifestation of a search for an Islamic identity," argues Muzaffar. "One could argue that it is an attempt to move away from what you see as Western identity — similar to Muslim women giving up Western clothes for Islamic dress."

But social and cultural critic Amir Muhammad thinks Raihan's fresh take on traditional music should be credited for the group's rapid rise to fame.

"People were in the mood for something soothing and new," he observes. "Rural Malays, too, were relieved to find music that is slickly produced and local without [being] too tacky."

At the same time, he points to Raihan's marketing strategy that is aimed at attracting non-Muslims as well. Amir notes that Raihan never puts down other "secular" groups as being "un-Islamic." He adds that the lyrics of Raihan's songs emphasise spirituality and compassion, rather than dogma and repression. Of course, it helps that the "their voices and percussion arrangements aren't bad at all".

"Most of Raihan's songs have a sing-along quality to them — the type of tune that you hum when you're walking," confirms Nurazlaya Bte Alias, an 18-year-old university student.

Even children are singing along. Says journalist and consumer activist Ismail Hashim: "Previously, children

would not memorise [nasyid] songs. They do now. My kids demand it to be played at home and in the car, and they sing along with it."

Says Abu Bakar, Raihan's background vocalist: "Entertainment and music are the closest thing to today's youngsters. If we are going to influence them, it will have to be through music."

As a result, the group's message is more accepted by a sector of society that would otherwise dismiss it as preachy or old-fashioned. "The difference between us and other pop singers is that we sing only about the good things," says Abu. "We don't sing about love between boy and girl, but true love to God, His kingdom."

Still, Raihan has had run-ins with some in the religious community. Manager Farahin Abdul Fattah says that when Raihan signed the promotion deal with Warner, some members of the Muslim community said the group had sold its soul.

"I said, what we are talking about here is God," relates Farahin. "What we want is to get the message across to the society as efficiently as possible. Warner Music has a strong marketing arm that we don't have."

"If you don't cooperate with non-Muslims because you want to promote Muslim songs, I think it's not right," adds Farahin, who has been in the music business since he was 10. "Then you cannot develop a healthy multi-cultural society. It defeats the purpose of being a good Muslim."

The decision to go ahead has paid off, not only in monetary terms. Leader Zarie recalls an incident when an ethnic Chinese toddler recognised him during a concert in a downtown mall, calling him "awa" (uncle).

The child's mother approached Zarie and asked if they were the singers she had seen on TV. When he said yes,

the woman said, “you know, my kids love your songs” and prompted her son to sing one of them. The boy promptly did so. Says Zarie: “We were very touched [that we] reached such non-Muslims.”

That Raihan sings mostly in Bahasa Malaysia should not be too much of an obstacle to its growing popularity abroad — at least, language did not stop it from gaining a fan in the British royal family. Prince Charles was in the audience when Raihan sang at a cultural festival at Edinburgh last year, and he was reportedly so impressed that he sent the group a letter of appreciation bearing his signature.

Former British pop star Cat Stevens was also so bowled over by Raihan’s performance that he joined it in a cut in the “Syukur” album. Stevens, better known these days as Yusuf Islam, Muslim preacher, recorded “God is the Light” in English with Raihan at a London studio.

Farahin says while the group’s critics may frown on its use of Western methods in promoting and popularising its music, Raihan is the one doing much of the “influencing”.

Says Farahin: “Western pop music culture has a lot of negatives attached to it, such as sex and drugs. We are introducing the positives to it such as love of God, ideas of sharing, compassion, respecting elders and the family.”

Source: IPS, 20 April 1998

I noted that hardly any studies had been undertaken on how localized pop music has prospered in these two Islamic societies, giving their youth a new modernist identity. I pondered the role that MTV has played in facilitating this, especially taking into account that MTV launched a